Rolling Stone

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ISSUE 1371

Rosalía Writes Her Own Rules

How the pop superstar refuses to compromise — and gets exactly what she wants

Kanye's Dark, Twisted Reality

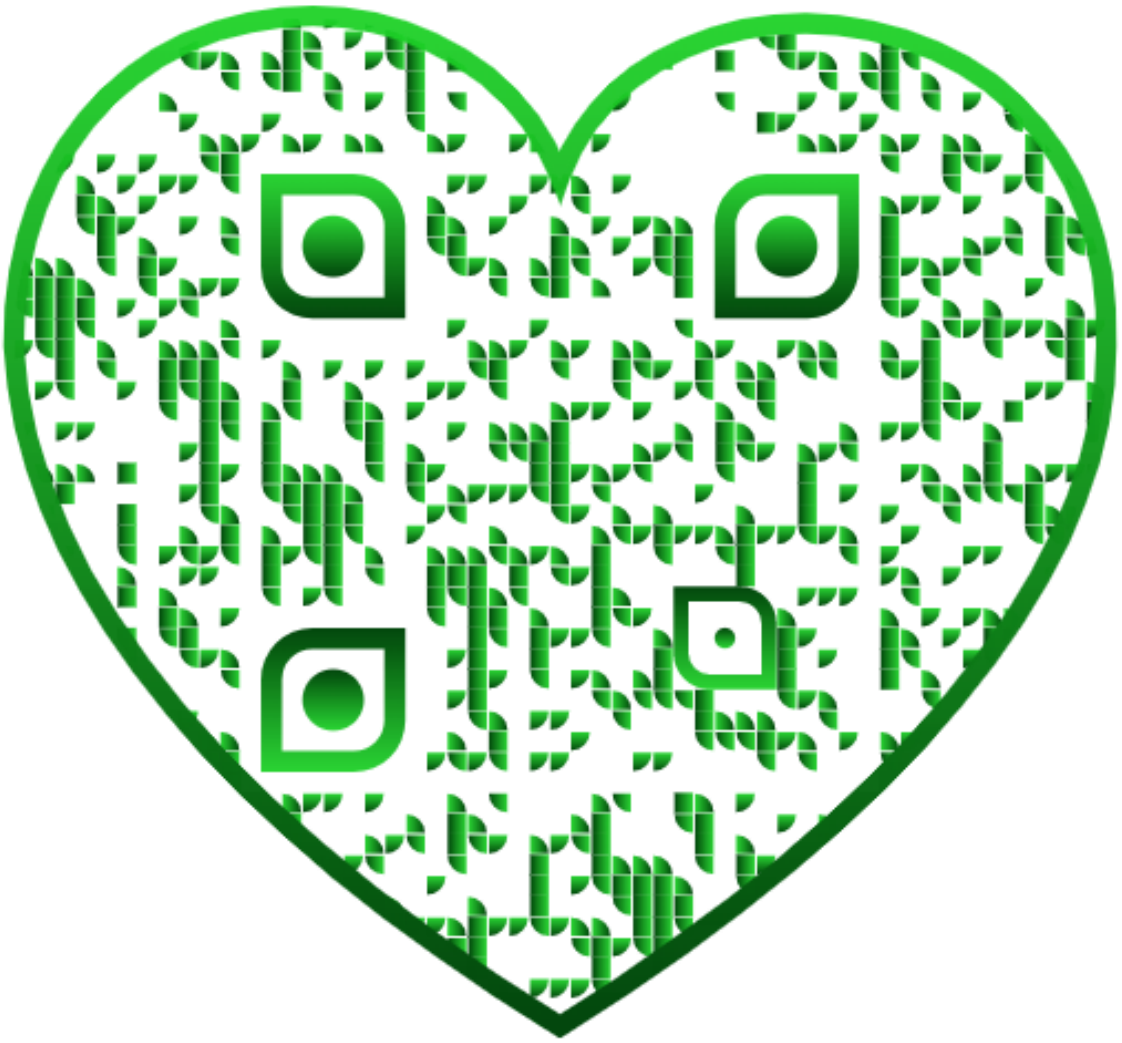
GAMING LEVELS UP

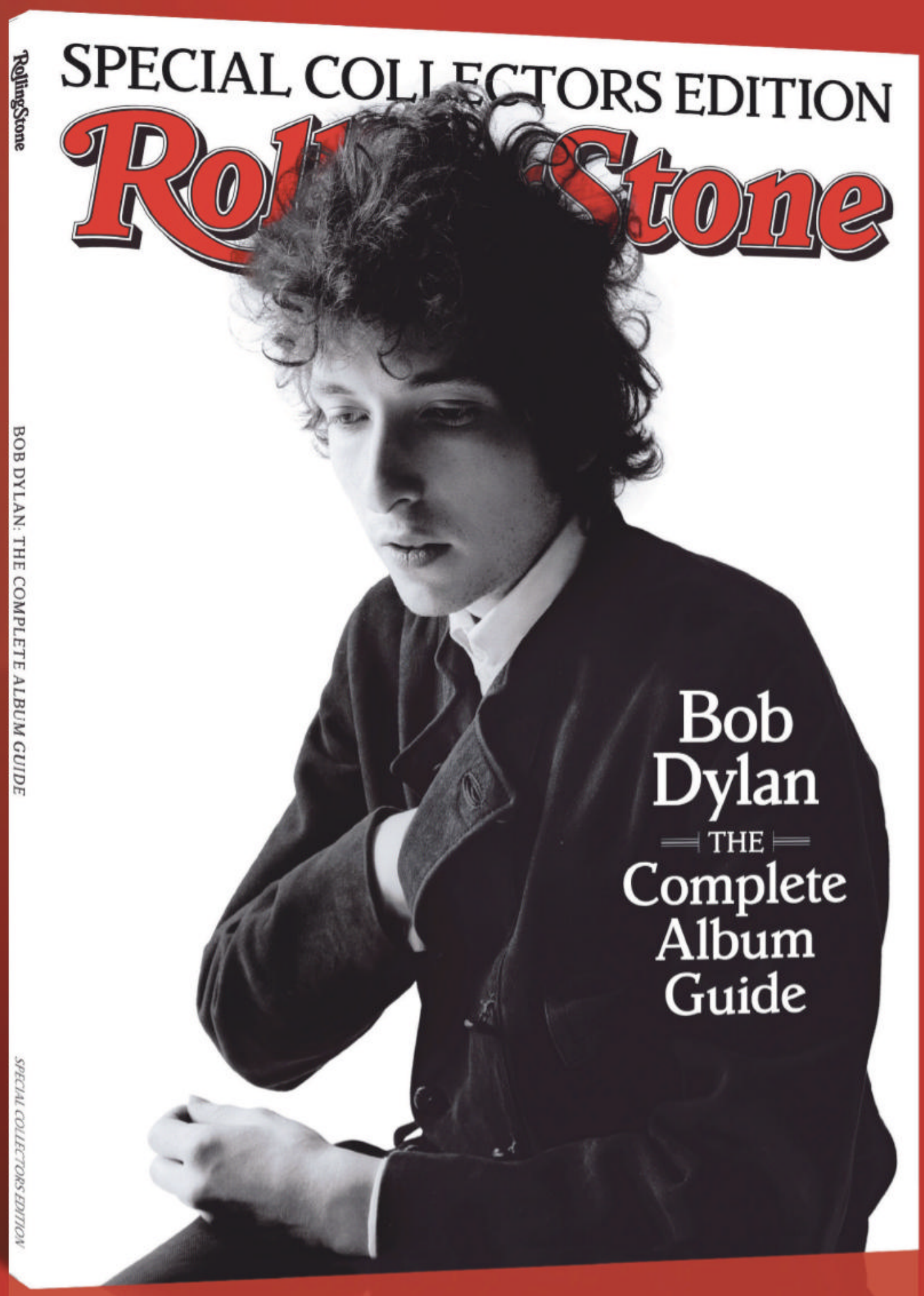
THE SEARCH FOR A LOST GN'R MASTERPIECE

NATASHA LYONNE, P.I.

AB-SOUL

U.S. GIRLS





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Opening Act

8 | PHOTOGRAPH BY **Carlos Gonzalez/the1point8**

Brockhampton Say Goodbye

THE SPRAWLING, 13-member collective known as Brockhampton made a lot of noise starting in the late 2010s, thrilling fans with their restless reinvention and their unique take on alternative rap. But all things come to an end, and on Nov. 19, the group played what was billed as its last show ever, at Los Angeles' Fonda Theatre. The high-energy set, running nearly two hours, was emotional for fans, says photographer Carlos Gonzalez: "What stood out is that every member of the band got their moment to shine.... The band definitely delivered a fire set, and the fans were there for it."

Merlyn Wood, Joba, Jabari Manwa, and Matt Champion (from left) at the Fonda Theatre in L.A.

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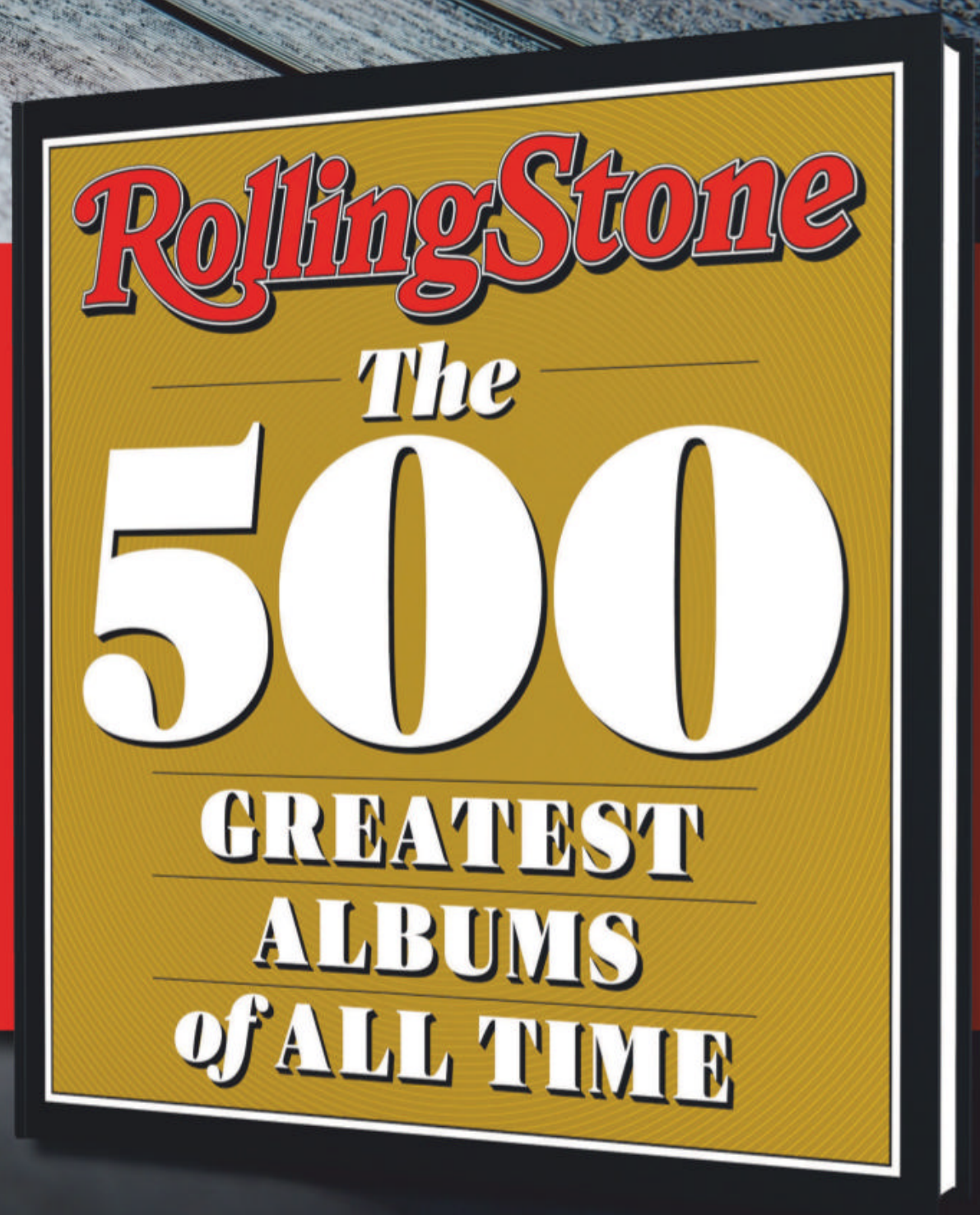
The 500 GREATEST ALBUMS of ALL TIME



"This book is a celebration of the glorious history of the album so far. Music keeps moving into the future—yet these classics are always going to be part of that future. Because these are albums the world will go on listening to forever."

—ROB SHEFFIELD,
from his introduction

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P1M

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, W

U.S. Girls' Beautiful 'Mess'

For her latest art-pop triumph, Meg Remy embraced life's big mysteries like never before

MAKEUP BY BRITTANY SINCLAIR FOR P1M

PHOTOGRAPH BY Vanessa Heins | 11

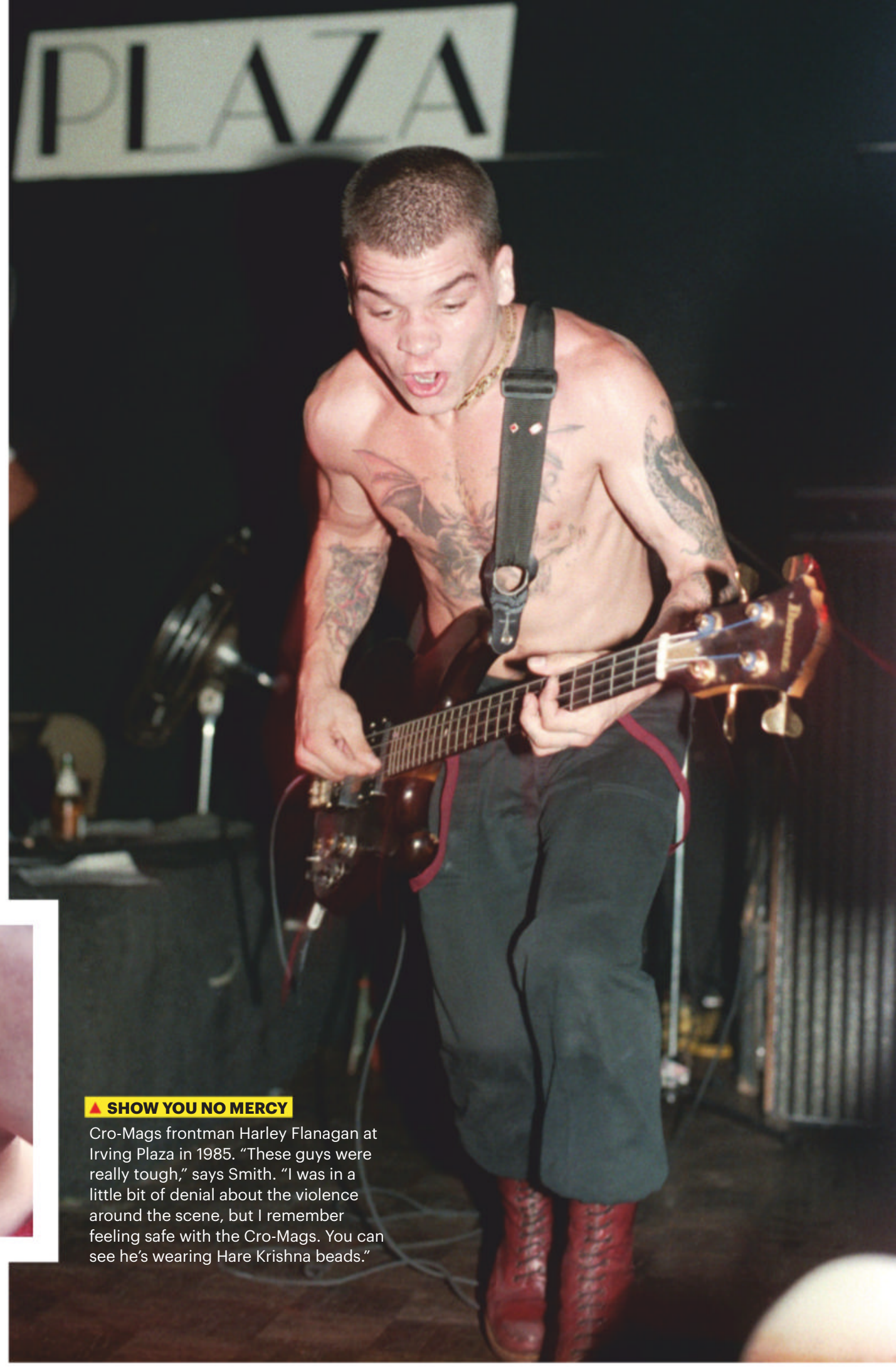
BOOK

Glory Days of New York Hardcore

Sunday Matinee
Radio Raheem, $39.99

BROOKE SMITH will forever be known for her role as Buffalo Bill's unfortunate kidnap victim, Catherine Martin, in *The Silence of the Lambs*. But before she "put the lotion in the basket," Smith was a part of a hardcore punk scene that congregated at dingy New York clubs like CBGB and Great Gildersleeves for shows by Agnostic Front, Cro-Mags, Bad Brains, and other underground icons. "I was attracted by the anger of the music," says Smith. "And the outsiderness of it all. You recognize your tribe when you meet them. I just felt, 'This is where I'm supposed to be.'" From the very beginning, she brought her camera along with her and captured intimate photos of performers and fans. The pictures sat in boxes for decades before she uncovered them during a move. Now, they've been exhibited in a gallery, and they're the centerpiece of a book, *Sunday Matinee*. "Nobody was trying to get rich or famous back then," she says. "It was our scene. We controlled it." ANDY GREENE

▲ AMERICAN MADE
Smith snapped this photo outside of CBGB of Murphy's Law/Cro-Mags drummer Pete Hines (right) next to a guy she doesn't remember. "Everyone was just starting to get their tattoos," she says. "That tattoo of the man on the left just means that he was born in America in 1966."



▲ SHOW YOU NO MERCY
Cro-Mags frontman Harley Flanagan at Irving Plaza in 1985. "These guys were really tough," says Smith. "I was in a little bit of denial about the violence around the scene, but I remember feeling safe with the Cro-Mags. You can see he's wearing Hare Krishna beads."

→ U.S. GIRLS

THE BREAST PUMP was waiting for Meg Remy at her Toronto home when she returned from the hospital with her twins. A friend had given it to her, even though Remy wasn't initially sure if she'd use the machine. But with two newborns to feed, she charged it up, flipped the switch – and out came a guttural *womp*.

"The minute I heard it, I was like, 'What is this fucking sound?'" says Remy, 37, bandleader and creative force behind the always-inventive, always-evolving pop outfit U.S. Girls. She recorded the pump's singular pulse and sampled it for "Pump," the final song on U.S. Girls' new album, *Bless This Mess*. The song's verses are basically a "straight-up reportage of my experience in the hospital," as Remy recounts a conversation with a night nurse; a second-half vamp distills the thoughts that ran through her head as she spent hours hooked to the pump. "Bodies, birth, death, machines," she repeats, a riddle of human connectivity.

"That would really be my only time alone, pumping milk multiple times a day," Remy says. "I'd sit and think, 'What the fuck am I doing right now? Why does it seem that we all need machines to teach us how to do something we inherently know how to do?'"

U.S. Girls began as an avant-garde basement project that debuted in 2008 while Remy was living in Philadelphia. In the 15 years since, she has come to specialize in an arty alchemy of rock, pop, funk, and soul that folds familiar pasts into brilliant futures, with danceable grooves and lacerating lyrics.

"So Typically Now," a single released last summer, is vintage U.S. Girls – a techno-tinged thumper skewering wealthy Brooklynites moving upstate in search of that ever-elusive something. But Remy doesn't let herself off the hook either. "Gotta sell all my best

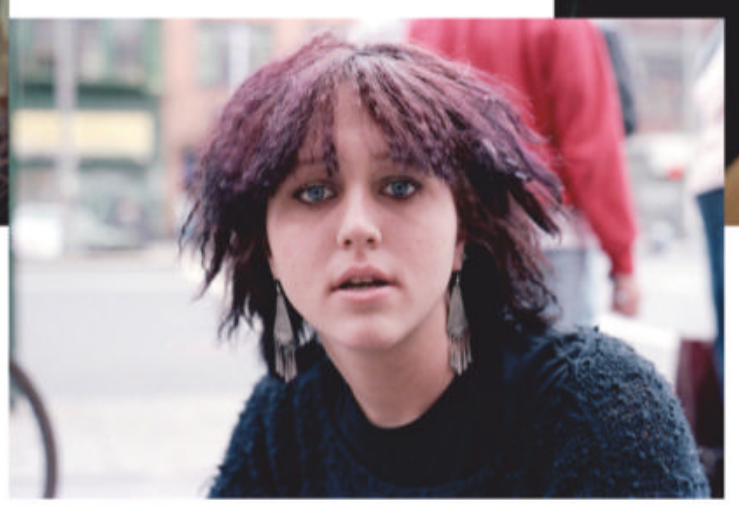
FAST FACT

BREATHE DEEP
Remy recorded the starry-eyed "St. James Way" while she was 34 weeks pregnant with twins. "I'm in a chair, in the dark, barely [able to] get out a whisper," she says. "I literally couldn't breathe down very far."

▼ CROWD SURFING
Underdog frontman Carl Demola sings to a typically wild pit as bouncer Big Charlie (in the football shirt) surveys the chaos. "We were soaked through [with sweat]," says Smith. "It was like a Bikram yoga class."

◀ ENGLISH MARK IN NEW YORK
After checking out the former seltzer factory as a possible squatting spot, English Mark headed up to the roof with his dog, Blitz. "Mark wasn't in a band," says Smith. "He was just this great, great guy from England. I never even knew his last name. I heard that he passed on, though."

▼ COMFY VIBES
Smith was usually the one holding the camera, so this is one of the few photos of herself that she has in her collection. She's outside of CBGB. "We had a hair crimper," she says. "It was really hard to get it to stay blue when I dyed it, since it would always turn green. Also, I really miss that sweater. I wore it most every day. It seemed like it had things living in it."



▲ SQUATTERS' RIGHTS
Hardcore scenester Olivia Larrain checks out an abandoned seltzer factory between Avenues B and C with her buddy English Mark. "We heard it might be a viable squat," says Smith. "When we got there, we realized it wasn't. I did find a gorgeous blue bottle in there that I have to this day."

▲ LOVE STORY
A quiet moment between Tommy Carroll, lead singer of straight-edge band Straight Ahead, and his girlfriend at the time, Alexa Poli. "Alexa was my roommate, and was definitely not straight-edge," says Smith. "It was a real love story between the two of them. They had a baby not long after this."

THIS SPREAD: BROOKE SMITH, 8

to buy more, not less," she sings. "See you someday in heaven."

Remy made the songs on *Bless This Mess* piecemeal over email with a variety of collaborators. The pandemic necessitated the process, but it was also a welcome change after recording U.S. Girls' 2020 album, *Heavy Light,* live in the studio. "We made it in one week," she says. "I don't need to do it again."

On *Heavy Light,* Remy began to excavate her past with new intensity, a process she continued with even greater daring and vulnerability in her 2021 memoir, *Begin by Telling*. It's a brief, brilliant, and brutal book, feminist theory and cultural criticism spiraling toward and from the harrowing revelation that her father sexually abused her as a child.

"Music is the best part. It's all the stuff around it that's a distraction. I have a voice, I can sing. That's not going anywhere."

Bless This Mess, Remy says, is a "total reaction" to both of those projects. "They were so raw and out there – no hiding," she says. "I think I went a little farther than I wanted to. I'm continuing to use my life's experience, but I needed it to be a little more veiled. Like, am I really going to tear off another layer of skin so soon, when it's still healing?"

She thought she'd make a guitar record next, a stripped-down "playing-the-U.S.-Girls-blues" album. Instead, as quarantine set in, she found herself drawn to MIDI instruments. Missing the dance floor, she spun out everything from surreal AM gold ("RIP Roy G Biv") to glittering disco delights ("Tux").

Looking ahead, she expresses uncertainty about things like the long-term viability of being a professional artist and the immediate concern of touring. She wants to play live, but is grappling with the dismal financial prospects, the time away from family, and the environmental toll from all that travel.

In these moments, she tries to find her way back to something simple: Music is sacred. "This isn't music's fault," she says. "Music is the best part. It's all the stuff surrounding it that's a distraction. I have a voice, I can sing. That's not going anywhere." **JON BLISTEIN**

[CHRISTINE McVIE, 1943-2022]

Fleetwood Mac's Songbird

She was an oasis of sanity in pop's most dysfunctional family and a universally beloved piano woman who wrote and sang decades of unquestionable classics

By ROB SHEFFIELD

CHRISTINE MCVIE always came on like the grown-up in the room, which admittedly might not be hard to do when the room is Fleetwood Mac. But McVie was the emotional glue in a band that has spent the past 50 years breaking up over and over – the most stable, sensible, down-to-earth member of rock's most unstable, senseless, lost-in-space circus: the universally beloved piano woman who wrote great song after great song, the one all the others got along with. Christine kept singing like the songbird who knew the score, and that's because she always did.

That's why the world is still in shock and grief after the news of McVie's death at age 79 arrived out of the blue on Nov. 30. As she told ROLLING STONE's Andy Greene just a few months earlier in 2022, "I was supposedly like the Mother Teresa who would hang out with everybody or just try and [keep] everything nice and cool and relaxed." Yet she admitted, "Even though I am quite a peaceful person, I did enjoy that storm. Although it's said that we fought a lot, we actually did spend a lot of our time laughing."

That spirit came out in her songs – peaceful and stormy at the same time. She wrote so many of the Mac's classics, focused on her husky, intimate voice and piano. "Say You Love Me," "Over My Head," "Oh Daddy," "Little Lies," "Why" – she sang in the voice of a world-weary adult romantic, a woman who's gotten burned and knows better, except she can't talk herself out of falling, falling, falling again. These were always shocking songs to hear on the radio, but they've just grown over the years.

Her solo demo of the 1979 *Tusk* piano ballad "Never Make Me Cry" is one of her mightiest heartbreakers, and it's the first song that this fan played at the terrible news of her death. "Go on and do what you want," she tells her fickle lover, even as she vows, "You'll never make me cry." The first time she sings that line, her refusal to cry sounds defiant and victorious. But by the end, she makes it feel like the saddest part of the story.

McVie was part of the Mac drama, especially in the *Rumours* era. She left her husband, John McVie, who happened to be the bassist. She moved in with the lighting director, shifting her wedding ring to a different finger. Not only did she write her hit "You Make Loving Fun" about how awesome it was having sex with the new guy, she made her ex play bass on it for the next 45 years – now that's a true boss move. (And to his credit, he played it brilliantly – another boss move.) In the funniest line, she sings, "*Yooo-hoo-hoo,* you make lovin' fun/And I don't have to tell you, but you're the only one!" Of course, Christine – fidelity, true love, sure, that goes without saying. As John wearily put it years later, "About the only two people in the band who haven't had an affair are me and Lindsey."

Some of the best moments in Fleetwood Mac's mid-2010s tours, which reunited all five of the classic lineup, came during Stevie Nicks' and Lindsey Buckingham's solo showcases. Every night, Christine would sit next to John on the piano bench, out of sight from most of the audience, just the two of them whispering and giggling together. They always huddled like two old friends, just sharing a private laugh. It was such a touching sight – so sweet and civilized, in the middle of all that emotional *Sturm und Drang*. She brought that warmth out in people. Even *these* people.

Christine and Stevie had a unique chemistry – two singer-songwriters, two frontwomen, in the extremely male world of Seventies L.A. rock. Stevie always gave McVie the credit for making it possible. As she told me in 2019, "Christine and I made a pact the day I joined Fleetwood Mac. She and I said, 'We will never be treated like second-class citizens. We will never be not allowed to hang out in a room full of intelligent, crazy rock & roll stars, because we're just as crazy and just as intelligent as they are.' We just made that promise to each other that we would do everything we could do for women, that we would fight for everything that we wanted and get it."

They always had a big sister/little sister rapport, with Christine as the world-weary elder smiling indulgently on her more impulsive, flighty sidekick – the Jane Russell to Stevie's Marilyn Monroe. That sisterhood set the Mac apart from their Hotel California peers. "If I had been the only girl in Fleetwood Mac, it would have been very different," Nicks said. "So I'm really glad I joined a band that happened to have another woman in it. At the beginning, people said, 'Does Christine *want* another girl in the band?' And I said, 'I *hope* she does. When she meets me, I hope she likes me.' She *did* really like me – we got Mexican food and we laughed and looked at each other and went, 'This is going to be great.' "

That was probably the last moment in Fleetwood Mac's history that anyone said those words. The band was a constant hurricane of heartbreak, betrayal, and rock excess. "There was blood floating around in the alcohol," Christine recalled later. "The studio contract rider for refreshments was like a telephone directory. Exotic food delivered to the studio, crates of champagne. And it had to be the best, with no thought of what it cost. Stupid. Really stupid. Somebody once said that with the money we spent on champagne on one night, they could have made an entire album. And it's probably true."

She started out in the Sixties as Christine Perfect, a rare female instrumentalist in the macho English blues scene. She found her voice playing piano in the band Chicken Shack with tunes like "When the Train Comes Back," from their 1968 debut. She married McVie in 1970, taking over as Fleetwood Mac's dominant songwriter, with unsung classics like her *Mystery to Me* ballad "Why."

She became a full-on superstar after Mick Fleetwood recruited a new guitar dude named Lindsey Buckingham, who insisted they also hire his girlfriend. For their first rehearsal together, she brought in "Say You Love Me." "I heard this incredible sound – our three voices – and said to myself, 'Is this me singing?' " McVie recalled. "I couldn't believe how great this three-voice harmony was. My skin turned to goose flesh."

In the *Tusk* era, she got engaged to the Beach Boys' drummer, Dennis Wilson, who brought a whole new level of chaos into her world. He moved into her mansion within days of meeting her, spending her money and drinking her vodka. He soon married (and abandoned) an 18-year-old girl, who happened to be Mike Love's daughter. McVie mourned him with "Wish You Were Here," the finale of *Mirage,* the year before he drowned drunk and was buried at sea. As she told ROLLING STONE in 2022, "Dennis was a bit of a madman."

Yet she turned the sexual and narcotic wreckage into classic songs. "Think About Me" is her hardest-rocking hit, from the end of the Seventies. She sneers

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

SWEET, WONDERFUL YOU
McVie onstage with Fleetwood Mac in 1975, at the dawn of the band's classic era

the chorus, sounding soulful yet cynically hardheaded about romance in the Me Decade: "I don't hold you down/Maybe that's why you're around." But she made it sound romantic.

She made a modest solo record in 1984 – you can hear the highlights on 2022's *Songbird (A Solo Collection)*. But she really shone on the classic Mac lineup's last gasp in 1987, *Tango in the Night*. "Everywhere" was a modest hit at the time, but it had a resurgence in later years as the album became a millennial fan fave. In "Little Lies," her craftiest Mac hit ever, she's typically resigned to getting cheated on, lied to, treated like dirt. But it has that soaring chorus showcasing each of the band's lead singers, top-notch fan service, where her pleading vocals clash with Lindsey's bitter "Tell me, tell me *liiiies!*"

She burned out on the rock-star life. As Nicks told ROLLING STONE, "We reformed with *The Dance* in 1997, but that only lasted a year before Christine flipped out and said, 'I just can't do this any more – I'm having panic attacks.' She sold her house and car and piano and moved back to England, never really to be heard from again." McVie had developed a terror of flying – understandable, considering how much time she'd spent on planes chartered by Mick Fleetwood. "The nomad thing had got a bit stale on me, really," she told ROLLING STONE in 2014. "I had some deluded idea that I wanted to live the 'country lady' life – basically hang out with my Range Rover and my dogs and bake cookies or something. . . . I just wanted to live a normal, domestic life with roots."

But she made a triumphant return for Fleetwood Mac's 2014-15 tour. In 2017, she and Lindsey released their very strange collabo album, featuring four-fifths of the Mac. It was supposed to be a studio-reunion blockbuster, but Nicks bailed. So it included a number called "On With the Show," a theme song for the band's On With the Show reunion tour – two years after it ended. A typical Mac moment of self-sabotage. The band kicked out Buckingham in a spectacularly messy fit, yet McVie sounded great as ever on the 2019 summer stadium tour, her last.

Characteristically, McVie was discreet and private about what turned out to be her final illness. Speaking to ROLLING STONE just a few months before she died, she casually revealed that the band members weren't in touch anymore – as she told it, the Mac had essentially split up yet again. "I don't feel physically up for it," she says. "I'm in quite bad health. I've got a chronic back problem which debilitates me." When asked about her goals, she replied, "Stay alive, hopefully. Well, I'll be 80 next year. So, I'm just hoping for a few more years, and we'll see what happens."

We didn't get those extra years of Christine McVie. But she scattered so many great songs across so many albums – some classic hits, others obscure cult faves – that you can spend years catching up with her greatness. These are songs that people will always sing to themselves on those lonely, late-night, bluesy moments that she always knew how to capture.

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-CULTURE PICKS OF THE MONTH

BOOK

1. ‘Andy Warhol and Friends’

A selection of shots from Steve Schapiro, who photographed Warhol and his friends (including Edie Sedgwick and the Velvet Underground & Nico) throughout 1966, a pivotal year for the pop artist.

NOVEL

2. ‘How to Sell a Haunted House’

This horror tale about two adult siblings dealing with a parent’s death — and a house full of puppets — is a searing look at grief, trauma, and how the things that haunt us aren’t always supernatural.

PODCAST

3. ‘What Makes This Song Stink’

Philly guitar hero Pat Finnerty found fame by eviscerating songs like 3 Doors Down’s “Kryptonite” and Train’s “Hey, Soul Sister” on his YouTube series. Now, he’s adapted it into a podcast, where he and guests like Kamau Bell carve up tunes by Maroon 5, Santana, and perhaps Finnerty’s favorite target, Kid Rock.

ALBUM

4. Ava Max’s ‘Diamonds and Dance Floors’

With touches of Eighties synths and retro-futurism, the Albanian American pop star delivers electro-pop bangers that will make you dance and cry at the same time.

COMIC BOOK

5. ‘TMNT: The Last Ronin – The Lost Years’

Two years after *The Last Ronin* reinvigorated the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles with a tragic take à la Old Man Logan, they return with the prequel of how sole survivor Michelangelo began his bloody quest for atonement.

TV SHOW

6. ‘Kindred’

This new FX series sticks close to the acclaimed 1979 novel by Octavia Butler on which it’s based, following Dana James (Mallori Johnson) as she unwillingly time travels to the slavery era, discovering and piecing together secrets of her own kin.

MOVIE

7. ‘You People’

Imagine *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* involving two California sneakerheads (Jonah Hill, Lauren London) and their unconvinced Jewish and Muslim families. Nia Long, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Eddie Murphy come through with some laugh-out-loud moments in the directorial feature debut from *Black-ish* creator Kenya Barris.

For reviews, premieres, and more, go to RollingStone.com/music

ALBUM

8. Villano Antillano’s ‘La Sustancia X’

On her debut album, the Puerto Rican artist shows exactly why she’s been one of the year’s most unstoppable stars: The proudly trans and sex-positive rapper always delivers necessary messages with charm, wit, power — and some of the hardest bars in the game.

PODCAST

9. ‘Infamous: Girls Gone Wild’

Campside’s first season of its new show about notorious Americans has journalist Vanessa Grigoriadis covering Joe Francis, founder of one of the 2000s’ greatest scams: getting girls to make porn for free.

THE SECOND COMING OF SHERYL LEE RALPH

“I HAVE NEVER FELT pressured to do anything in my career,” says Sheryl Lee Ralph, 66, who recently produced a Broadway play on top of winning an Emmy for her portrayal of Barbara Howard on the hit ABC sitcom *Abbott Elementary*. “Except excellence.”

A onetime Dreamgirl with experience acting for luminaries such as Sidney Poitier, Ralph spent decades crafting quintessential roles. But a lack of mainstream recognition nearly led her to quit 15 years ago. “I wasn’t feeling seen,” she says. During a chance encounter with a casting director, Ralph was given a much-needed reality check. “Do you know who you are?” the director said. “You can do anything!”

Now, her role on *Abbott Elementary* feels less like work and more like celebration. “The way people respond to me, I just love how they love Barbara Howard,” she says. And she does see a similarity in herself. “I’m gonna give it to you straight and upfront, but always with love,” she says. Despite her Emmy, Ralph wants people to know that she’s still on the rise. “Even though I’m on the top of the world, I see other planets out there,” she says. “I can’t help but think, ‘Let’s go!’” **CT JONES**

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: TINA ROWDEN/FX; GIOVANNIE BERDECÍA; PARRISH LEWIS/NETFLIX; SEAN BLACK PHOTOGRAPHY AND JACQUI G STALLWORTH/10:30 DESIGNS; ARNOLD JEROCKI/GETTY IMAGES; STEVE SCHAPIRO

PURE HEROINE Lyonne as Charlie Cale in *Poker Face*

EVANS VESTAL WARD/PEACOCK

A Master Sleuth on the Run

Rian Johnson's 'Poker Face' turns star Natasha Lyonne into a fast-talking, lie-detecting, mystery-solving fugitive

By ALAN SEPINWALL

NATASHA LYONNE thinks that the very idea of lying is bullshit.

"I don't think I believe in it philosophically, as a concept," she says. "When people lie, on a deep level, I'm perplexed that they don't seem to know that we're going to die and that their lie doesn't matter. It's just a source of confusion."

It's late on a Friday night, and the diminutive redhead is carrying her laptop from room to room in her Los Angeles home so she can opine without interrupting our Zoom call. Her mind is spitting out ideas in full paragraph form, delivered with such speed and intensity that it feels like she's in constant motion, even after she finally sits on her couch. The notion of lying leads to her hatred of small talk, as she argues that "How are you?"/"I'm fine" is "the worst couplet in the history of the world" – and also a lie. "Why? Because human beings are complex and going through many things at the same time. Some of which are marveling at the beauty and the poetry of the riddle, and others are just debating how we ended up in such a losing setup to begin with. So inherently, any living, breathing person experiencing sentience is inherently not fine. They're anything but fine. That is the primary lie that I can't stand for.

"That's why," she adds, not even stopping to catch her breath, "I really, really identify with my friend Charlie."

"Charlie" is Charlie Cale, the protagonist of the new mystery series *Poker Face,* created by *Knives Out* and *Glass Onion* writer-director Rian Johnson, which begins streaming Jan. 26 on Peacock. Both watchful and restless, Charlie is a human lie detector with an innate ability to recognize when someone isn't speaking truthfully. Once upon a time, she used this superpower to make money as a professional cardsharp – one good enough to earn the notice, and eventual ire, of a dangerous casino magnate. When the series begins, she's settled into a quieter life as a cocktail waitress who lives in a trailer in the desert. She wears her trucker hat low, drives a barely functional 1969 blue Plymouth Barracuda, and minds her own business. Then her best friend is murdered, and Charlie can't stomach the obvious attempt to cover up the real motive for the crime. She finds a way to punish the bad guy, but as a result becomes a fugitive, forced to travel from town to town across the country. And – wouldn't you know it? – there is a murder at each stop, and a killer only she can catch.

If Charlie is not as exact a custom tailoring job as the one Lyonne stitched for herself as the time-traveling game designer Nadia Vulvokov on Netflix's *Russian Doll,* she is awfully close – a testament to Johnson's understanding of Lyonne's specific talents, and to their joint fondness for vintage mystery-of-the-week shows like *Columbo*. The role exploits Lyonne's gift for fast talking and even faster thinking. It lets her be hilarious with her wisecracks and her reactions to all the strange people she meets. And it taps into her dramatic talents and, especially, the charisma that she has had since she was a child actor but that Holly-

HEART TO HEART Polanco and Lyonne play best friends in the *Poker Face* pilot.

wood didn't fully understand how to harness until she forced the issue as she turned 40.

And if Lyonne's own capacity to spot lies isn't quite as uncanny as Charlie's, it's not far off, owing as much to her checkered past – her struggles with heroin in the 2000s eventually led to both open-heart surgery and a court-mandated stint in rehab – as to her innate intelligence.

"I would say I am an excellent bullshit detector," she says. "Thanks to a life that's taken me from skid row to the Chateau Marmont and back again, I really have seen some shit. And I guess the gift that gives you is street smarts. And part of that is to know, 'Oh, this is a *smart* person to go into the alley and score from. This is a *bad* person to go into the alley and score from.' The way that manifests out there in the world of Hollywood is, I've retained that knowledge in many big and small ways. I can see very quickly: 'This is a motherfucker I want nothing to do with. And this person who's a PA is going to become my right-hand man for life.'"

Johnson seems like a potential lifelong collaborator. They met through his wife, the podcaster and film critic Karina Longworth. Lyonne wanted Animal Pictures, the production company she runs with Maya Rudolph, to adapt an episode from Longworth's *You Must Remember This* podcast. The two hit it off, and soon Johnson was also taken with Lyonne. He had grown up loving episodic crime shows like *The Rockford Files* and *Magnum, P.I.*, and had long wanted to make one of them himself. Watching *Russian Doll,* he recognized Lyonne as a kind of "modern-day Peter Falk – a strong enough personality to be the center of a show that isn't one long story. You have to come back each week because you want to hang out with that person."

Johnson took her to dinner and pitched her on the idea. Lyonne found him as much a kindred spirit as she had Longworth. They discovered, for instance, that they shared a deep love for Robert Altman's postmodern Phillip Marlowe film *The Long Goodbye*, with a shambling Elliott Gould performance that Lyonne drew on heavily in crafting Nadia. (Both Nadia and Gould's Marlowe spend a lot of time muttering under their breath, lost in their own heads, and chasing after an elusive cat.) Johnson worried that Lyonne would assume this was another empty Hollywood promise about working together someday, but Lyonne recalls thinking, "This Rian Johnson is a pretty serious person. Why on earth would he waste his time coming to eat steak with me, sitting here with notebooks?" ("I also had a notebook," she adds triumphantly – another sign they would make a good team.)

This would be only the second time in Johnson's career (after the 2012 sci-fi thriller *Looper,* starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt) that he wrote a script with a particular lead actor in mind, according to his longtime producing partner Ram Bergman. As with the Agatha Christie-esque *Knives Out* films, he was taking an older storytelling model that had fallen deeply out of fashion – in this case, a series built on entirely self-contained episodes rather than massive season-long arcs – and finding a way to modernize it without losing what made it work to begin with.

"He has a deep understanding of genre," says Longworth. "He likes to take things apart and see how they work, and then find ways to put them back together, but he doesn't have any interest in doing it unless he can subvert those tropes and put them back together in a new way that allows him to put his own spin on it."

Johnson faced a lot of incredulity within the industry when he decided to follow *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* with something as seemingly quaint and dusty as *Knives Out*. Even after that turned out to be an enormous crowd-pleasing hit, he and Bergman received a similarly skeptical reception when they began pitching *Poker Face* to streamers.

"I knew that there was a certain amount of gravity right now towards serialized storytelling," Johnson says. "But I didn't think the notion of truly episodic TV in this mode was going to be seen as this big of a wacky swing. I was unprepared for the blank stares and the follow-up questions of, 'Yes, but what's the arc over the course of a season?' There is, right now, this odd assumption that this is what keeps people watching. I think [executives] equate the cliffhanger at the end of the episode with the reason people click onto the next one."

Not only does *Poker Face* not have ongoing storylines, it has only one other ongoing character: Benjamin Bratt's Cliff Legrand, a menacing casino enforcer hot on Charlie's trail. And even he's in only half the episodes, sometimes just briefly before Charlie eludes his grasp. In the Nineties, Bratt did a four-year stint on *Law & Order,* one of the preeminent mystery-of-the-week shows. And like Johnson and Lyonne, he has a soft spot for the *NBC Mystery Movie* franchise, which also included series like *McMillan & Wife* and *McCloud,* and whose typeface is adapted here for the *Poker Face* credits. "It's a little sad," Bratt says of how severely Hollywood has come to shun the genre. "These newer generations have no idea what that was. And they're going to be able to discover what was once cherished and create a whole new model, hopefully."

"I'm an excellent bullshit detector. Thanks to a life that's taken me from skid row to the Chateau Marmont and back again, I really have seen some shit. And the gift that gives you is street smarts."

WHILE HE'S PRIMARILY a film director, Johnson helmed several episodes of *Breaking Bad*, including two that represent the opposite ends of the TV storytelling spectrum: "Fly," a largely standalone hour where Walt and Jesse chase a bug through their lab; and "Ozymandias," the shocking culmination of every story the series had been telling through five seasons. He was more than comfortable in both modes ("Fly" is riveting despite its incredibly small story; "Ozymandias" may be the greatest TV-drama episode ever). Still, he needed help learning how to make a show where he wasn't the hired gun.

Johnson recruited writer-producer sisters Nora and Lilla Zuckerman, whose résumé encompasses procedural series like *Fringe* and *Prodigal Son,* to show him the ropes, which included working in a writers room since he had written all of his films on his own. They had to figure out the logistics of a show where each episode has a new setting and supporting cast – guest stars include Gordon-Levitt, Adrien Brody, Lil

PHILLIP CARUSO/PEACOCK

Rel Howery, Nick Nolte, and Lyonne's longtime friends Clea DuVall and Chloë Sevigny – as well as ways that Charlie's special ability wouldn't stop stories dead. (Among her limitations: She may know *if* someone is lying, but not *why* they are, nor what the truth is.) Since she has to avoid attracting the attention of authorities, the writers needed to find ways to achieve justice that didn't always involve the killer being led away in handcuffs. And going back to the *Columbo* model, they had to figure out how to keep the audience engaged for the Charlie-less first act of each episode that focuses on the killers and their victims. Though Peacock executives appreciated the concept in a way their competitors didn't, Johnson frequently got notes from them asking if Charlie could be introduced sooner.

It's an understandable concern, because Lyonne lights up the screen whenever she's on it. There are actors who are great soloists and actors who thrive in duets. Lyonne excels at either. She spends a good chunk of one episode arguing with a grouchy, flatulent dog, carrying both ends of the conversation with enough flair to kill the old showbiz adage about the dangers of acting opposite animals. But on the whole, Charlie is warmer and more laid-back than the misanthropic Nadia, inquisitive about the people she meets and their passions, like when she is delighted to let one of her new friends from a Texas barbecue joint teach her about the scents and flavors of different kinds of wood.

Lyonne says the touchstone here is less Gould or Falk than Jeff Bridges as the Dude, and Johnson recalls that when he pitched her the character, she replied excitedly, "Aha! She *likes people*! This is something different I can do." But Charlie and Nadia nonetheless share that same undeniable star quality and presence, which somehow makes Lyonne seem more imposing than towering scene partners like Brody or Bratt. Like Nadia, or like Lyonne's recovering addict Nicky Nichols on *Orange Is the New Black,* Charlie is a champion talker, frequently speechifying her opponents into submission.

"Watching her connect with other actors is truly a joy," says Nora Zuckerman. "You can see the charisma pouring off her. That really informs Charlie. Charlie is moving from town to town and case to case, and she's surrounded by new people every time. And Charlie as a character is magnetic – people are drawn to her, and they open up to her – and I think Natasha shares that energy. It was really incredible to watch."

Charlie and Nadia represent temperamentally opposed variations of what has by now become the famil-

Moonlighting's Shepherd and Willis

WATCHING THE (PRIVATE) DETECTIVES

Love whodunit shows? Here are 10 classics

Peter Gunn
1958-61

Where most of the medium's early private detectives were adapted from books, movies, and radio plays, Craig Stevens' Peter Gunn was created by Blake Edwards directly for TV. A suave jazz lover who rarely had a hair out of place, Gunn was one cool cat, enough to live up to the show's iconic Henry Mancini-penned theme song, which has long outlived memories of Gunn himself.

Magnum, P.I.
1980-88

Tom Selleck guested in a few late-period *Rockford Files* episodes. And if his title character here — a Vietnam vet driving a red Ferrari all over Oahu and living in a rich novelist's guest house — was presented as cooler and more innately heroic than Jim Rockford, Thomas Magnum nonetheless seemed a worthy heir to the throne of television's most likable private dick.

Selleck

The Rockford Files 1974-80

Rian Johnson says detective shows are secretly hangout shows, and no P.I. was ever more fun to hang out with than Jim Rockford, played by the superhumanly charming James Garner. An ex-con living in a trailer in a Malibu parking lot, Rockford took on all manner of sketchy clients, and frequently got punched in the stomach for his troubles. But he always got back up.

Moonlighting
1985-89

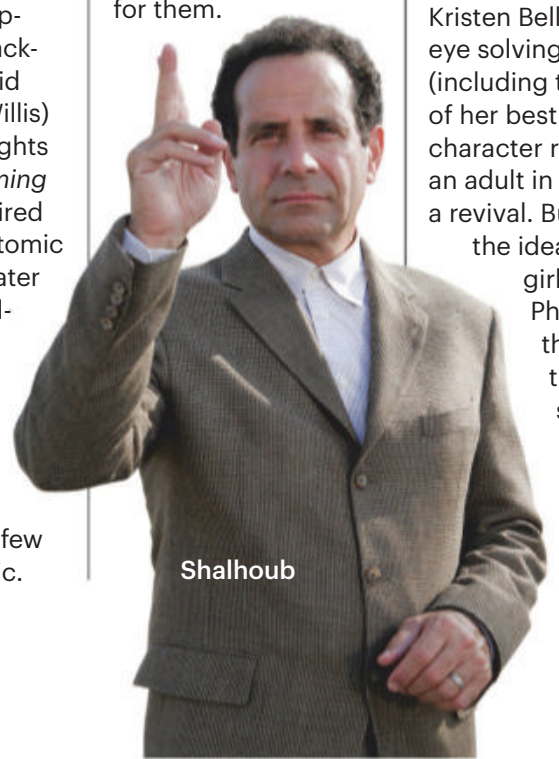
A huge phenomenon at first, due to scorching chemistry between ex-model Maddie Hayes (Cybill Shepherd) and wisecracking detective David Addison (Bruce Willis) and to creative flights of fancy like a *Taming of the Shrew*-inspired episode called "Atomic Shakespeare." It later fell apart — in reality, Shepherd and Willis hated each other, and ABC had to air reruns when new episodes weren't ready — but for a few years, it was magic.

The Singing Detective
1986

The masterwork of one of TV's most audacious creators, Dennis Potter's miniseries blends hard-boiled crime drama, movie musicals, and gritty realism. Michael Gambon plays a mystery novelist hospitalized with crippling psoriasis who copes with the pain by imagining himself as a singing gumshoe. Weird, thrilling, heartbreaking.

Monk 2002-09

Obsessive-compulsive disorder proved both blessing and curse for Tony Shalhoub's amusing, endearing Emmy-winning title character here. On the one hand, Monk is so wracked with anxiety and germophobia that it's a wonder he can leave the house. On the other, his fixation on tiny details makes him a brilliant investigator who every week does the cops' work for them.



Shalhoub

Logue (left) and Raymond-James

Burn Notice
2007-13

Michael Westen wasn't technically a P.I. but an ex-spy with a particular set of skills that proved useful when vulnerable people needed his help. His talent for improvised weaponry — say, destroying a car's engine with a coffee can full of thermite — came in especially handy week after week, as did the help of colorful pals Fiona (Gabrielle Anwar) and Sam (Bruce Campbell).

Veronica Mars
2004-07

A shockingly successful marriage of film noir and teen angst, starring a young Kristen Bell as a private eye solving mysteries (including the murder of her best friend). The character returned as an adult in a movie and a revival. But it was the idea of a teen girl acting like Philip Marlowe that made the show special.

Terriers 2010

Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd have the most famous chemistry of any TV-detective duo. But the platonic bond between *Terriers* co-stars Donal Logue (as an alcoholic ex-cop) and Michael Raymond-James (as a thief trying to go straight) was intoxicating in its own right. If only enough people had been aware of the wonderful but short-lived FX drama — or hadn't assumed the title meant it was about dogfighting.

Sherlock
2010-17

There's a long, storied list of small-screen Sherlock Holmeses, including CBS' very solid *Elementary,* whose run overlapped with this fabulously clever BBC version, co-written by *Dr. Who* veteran Steven Moffat. Set in modern times (Holmes is good at texting), this *Sherlock* made a star of Benedict Cumberbatch, did the same for Martin Freeman as a tougher-than-usual Dr. Watson, and had a great Moriarty in a pre-*Fleabag* Andrew Scott.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: ABC/EVERETT COLLECTION; FX/EVERETT COLLECTION; CBS TELEVISION/EVERETT COLLECTION; CARIN BAER/USA NETWORK

iar Lyonne persona, in both her acting roles and in interviews and public appearances. The actual Lyonne is capable of that, too. Friends and coworkers laugh at how difficult it can be to keep up with her verbally – "I told her I need at least three cups of coffee before we begin rehearsing," says Bratt – and how much disarray she can leave in her wake. "Fuck Columbo; she's Paddington Bear," jokes Lyonne's *Orange* co-star Dascha Polanco, who appeared on *Russian Doll* and guests in the *Poker Face* premiere.

carpentry-like precision of the workings of a set at bay, so she can create stuff that feels real." Lurking beneath Johnson's soft-spoken, amiable exterior, meanwhile, is the man with, as Bratt puts it, the "actively devious imagination" that allows him to write these twisty murder mysteries. So Johnson was able to quickly tune into Lyonne's on-set wavelength. While he admits they probably drove a lot of the cast and crew nuts by singing the Meow Mix jingle to each other, "It's all to a purpose."

THEIR BEST SHOT Lyonne and Bratt team up. Right: Johnson on set.

"She's a modern-day Peter Falk – a strong enough personality to center a show that isn't one long story. You come back each week because you want to hang out with that person."

But just as the rumpled exteriors of Columbo, Marlowe, and Paddington conceal their tenacity and wisdom, a serious capital-A actor lurks beneath Lyonne's fast-paced, digressive, absurdist patter. "One of the surprising things about Natasha is just how dedicated and very highly technical she is," says Lilla Zuckerman. "She is incredibly studious. She arrives so prepared. And then she gets onto set and it seems so easy, and it seems so laid-back. She's got that lovely, chill vibe that I think really hides the craft behind it."

She found a good match with Johnson, who does just as much homework and is just as decisive, while also recognizing the importance of keeping things light. "She seems like she's constantly cracking jokes and keeping this air of chaos and levity around her," Johnson says of his leading lady, "and very quickly, I realized she's doing this very intentionally in order to keep the

Even Lyonne sometimes gets fooled by her own persona. Told that Longworth described her as "the smartest person I have ever met," Lyonne's eyes bug out in disbelief – a rare moment where she is at a loss for words. But the many thoughts soon find her, and she is off monologuing again:

"I think I have some sort of smart-people boner disease, just to seem as smart as I can in this moment. I am very hot for very smart people. They really do it for me. I don't want to possess their bodies. I want to possess their brains. I want to put their brains in a jar in a room. I want to take my brain out of my body, put it in its own jar. And then I want to sit in my bed like Ray Liotta in *Hannibal,* sit there with my skull just open, watching the brains play together and hang out while my brainless self sits in bed smoking cigarettes. That's my fantasy, you see."

Lyonne has lately put those smarts, and her mind-expandingly acid-trippy perspective, to work in new ways. After decades of feeling like she didn't fit in as an actor – she says she and DuVall "were a pair of terrible ingenues" a generation before outsiders became the cool kids – she followed DuVall and Sevigny into directing, mainly as a way, at least with *Russian Doll,* to showcase her own on-camera versatility and magnetism. It paid off: "I've been in this business now for 35 years," she says, "and I figure it's like the last five years are the only time my case went hot. It was because of me saying, 'OK, I'm gonna start making my own shit.'" But everyone who has watched her behind the camera thinks that may be where her bliss really is, including Johnson, who asked her to co-write and direct one of the *Poker Face* episodes.

"I feel like where you see her become most herself is when she's directing," says Johnson. "You think, 'Wow, this is really what she should be doing.' She's a fantastic performer. But when you see her putting all that energy and focus into the creative act of controlling a set and getting what she wants, it's like a butterfly unfolding its wings."

Sevigny got to watch her friend in action as a director while playing Nadia's mother on *Russian Doll* and was impressed that Lyonne had prepared, with an acting coach, by rehearsing every character on her own so she could better relate to each member of the cast. In fact, Sevigny argues that she and Lyonne are happier directing because "we're both too self-conscious to actually be good actors." She pauses to joke that her publicist must be freaking out about this sentiment, then elaborates, "We both love making things and group activities and being around other people, and we love cinema and movies and TV, but I don't think we both really love acting. And we're tortured by certain aspects of it, because of low self-esteem around looks and all of that.

"But she also likes to be the boss," she adds, "and the director is the boss."

Often, the price to pay for being the boss is not a lot of free time. Lyonne says she works "to the bone. No life, no kids. It's just me and Rootbeer." She turns her laptop around to show her dog, a little Maltipoo, resting on the sofa beside her.

The workaholism is another common thread between her and Johnson, who segued straight from filming the *Knives Out* sequel *Glass Onion* into producing *Poker Face*. For a while, he would spend half of each day in the writers room with the Zuckermans and their staff, and the other half doing postproduction work on the movie. His longtime cinematographer Steve Yeldin followed him onto the project, and says that they were able to deliver their usual "really designed, conscientious, thoughtful shots" on a compressed television schedule only because Johnson has a well-honed sense of what a given scene does and doesn't need.

"I don't think that he necessarily understood that he would have to have his hands on it all day every day for this period of time," says Longworth. "I think he thought that there was going to be more of a machine than there is on his movies. The kind of creator he is, he still treats it like he's an auteur, so he wants to be involved with everything."

Despite the overwhelming time suck of producing television, Johnson seems interested in taking the same approach to *Poker Face* that he has to the Benoit Blanc films – and to keep making it so long as his star is interested. After all, Peter Falk played Columbo off and on for a quarter century. "We'll see how long Natasha sticks with it," Johnson says. "Maybe we can give him a run for his money."

Would Lyonne be interested in doing it for that amount of time? "I've gotta get old somewhere! How else am I gonna convince Rian and Karina to adopt an adult child?" she jokes.

"The thing that I love with acting," she says, "it's almost like being a musician. If it's Rian, I want him to Svengali me. There are certain people that don't interest me, but I like the idea that he's a composer, and he's letting me know what part of the song I can play in service to his album. And I want to do it as best I can for him. It makes me happy to do it. I feel very alive when it's all happening. And I like to not feel dead inside."

And that's no bullshit.

FROM TOP: PEACOCK; PHILLIP CARUSO/PEACOCK

ARTIST YOU NEED TO KNOW

Ambré's True Expressions

THE LINE AROUND Manhattan's S.O.B.'s is a long one as fans wait to see Ambré Perkins perform. Blunts spark outside the club, and the vibe is calm yet charged, dark yet flowy — just like the music that has made Ambré, 26, one of R&B's most compelling new voices. Growing up in New Orleans, where she moved often through foster care, she recalls being surrounded by music. She feels her childhood "contributed to me being an observant person…having to view the world from a different perspective because I met so many people." MEAGAN JORDAN

10-SECOND BIO

HOMETOWN
New Orleans

LEGENDS ONLY Her album *3000º* is titled in tribute to her heroes Juvenile and Lil Wayne (specifically, their albums *400 Degreez* and *500 Degreez*) and André 3000.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Nathan Bajar** |

MAGNIFIQUE
Stromae at New York's Madison Square Garden, November 2022

 | PHOTOGRAPH BY **Sacha Lecca**

SPOTLIGHT

How Stromae Got Back to the Top of His Game

The Belgian singer took nearly a decade off from music – now he's returned triumphantly

THE LAST Francophone artist to sell out Madison Square Garden before Stromae did (twice) in November was the Belgian singer himself – seven years earlier, in 2015. Back then, he toured his album *Racine Carrée* around the world seemingly nonstop. He was left burned out, uninspired, and ready for a break. So he left music almost completely for nearly a decade.

"I just wanted to live normal stuff, like having a baby, getting married," he says. "I wanted to get inspired."

In the subsequent years, Stromae, 37, balanced fatherhood with writing his next LP: *Multitude,* the *Bridgerton* trailer-sampling, cumbia-infused album that brought him back to pop's peaks in 2022. Highlights of the project include "C'est Que du Bonheur" about becoming a father – a sequel, he says, to his hit "Papaoutai," a potent song about growing up without a dad – and "La Solassitude," on which he opens up about struggling with loneliness. Stromae is particularly proud of "Fils de Joie," which he wrote about a sex worker from the perspective of her son, the police, and her client. "That's a part of humanity that we want to hide all the time," he says. "I just want to put the spotlight on stuff that we're not used to talking about."

Stromae has big plans for 2023: In March, he'll hit the road again, bringing his colorful storytelling to massive arenas across Europe. But this time, he's worked in days-long breaks to make time for an even more important gig. "I have a baby boy now. I have a family life," he says. "Back in the day, I was just alone at home with no obligations. But now, my life has changed." TOMÁS MIER

PROFILE

Ab-Soul Took His Time

The once-buzzing rapper prepares to release his first project in six years – the time away made his vision clear

By PAUL THOMPSON

IN THE PARKING LOT of Anderson Memorial Park in Carson, California, just south of Compton and north of Long Beach, Ab-Soul chain-smokes Newports and speaks gently. We're close to the houses he grew up in alongside his mother, aunts, and paternal grandparents. "I kinda like to call it the ghetto suburb," the rapper, 35, says from the open back seat of a Tesla SUV. "Because it is a suburb, but it's got all the other stuff, too." And yet, as is typical of neighborhoods in the southern half of the county, it doesn't look precisely like either: There are plenty of single-family homes, and some of the lawns sit pristine and manicured. But there are neglected stretches without commercial or residential development, and freeways snake in every direction, bisecting neighborhoods and pumping smog into the air.

He's here to give his first proper interview in many years, in advance of his fifth album, *Herbert,* the first new LP he'll release in more than six years. There are absences, and then there are *absences*; even by the glacial standards of Top Dawg Entertainment, the independent label he signed to in 2008, Soul has been out of sight and mind. Until promotion for *Herbert* began, he had appeared on a total of eight songs since Donald Trump took office. And yet he betrays no nervousness: He seems calm, centered, and eager to talk about his career, which pieces of regional styles do and do not bleed across state lines, even the chronology of some of his tattoos. As soon as his security detail arrives, he unfolds his lanky frame from the Tesla and walks, with a slight limp, over some gentle hills toward a cement picnic table.

Herbert is Soul's best album by a chasmic margin, both more urgent and mature than everything that precedes it. While there's a ready-made narrative about the record as therapy or redemption after an impossibly trying period in his personal life, Soul is quick to undercut it. He sees *Herbert* as something of an obligation. "Telling the truth is hard," he says, "but those are the sacrifices. It's your testimony: You could help someone else. A lot of people who follow me tell me I saved their life. I make sure to tell them: 'No, you saved *mine*.'"

ON THE COVER of *Herbert,* a young Ab-Soul – that would be Herbert Stevens IV – sits on the floor in overalls, a credenza full of records behind him and headphones dwarfing his toddler head while he claps and smiles at what he hears. He says this is representative of music's centrality in his life, though not a typical scene.

"In my household, there wasn't really music playing," he explains, because the family would listen to songs all day while working in the record shop his grandparents owned. From the time he could move his shoulders to *Off the Wall,* he understood that what music he heard was governed by business concerns and consumer whims. It also meant that his relatives, experts though they were, didn't have the time or inclination to guide him through new genres after-hours. "Different artists would pay for in-store play," he recalls. "If it was rap playing, it would be the clean version. I had to find hip-hop on my own."

"Telling the truth is hard, but those are the sacrifices," says Ab-Soul. "It's your testimony: You could help someone else."

Soul gravitated, in his adolescent years, to the most verbose, formalist, showily technical music available to him. He had written a verse to a Twista beat and developed an appreciation for Snoop Dogg, but it was discovering rappers like Canibus online that activated his brain. Soul pored over their labyrinthine verses, obsessing over double- and triple-entendres. He began "keystyling" – imagine a rap battle, typed out – on websites like Black Planet. On one of those message boards he met a man from the Twin Cities named Lawrence Fuller. Roughly six years his senior, Fuller, who would go on to carve his own distinguished career under the name Metasota, was sick of seeing this talented kid get eaten up in battles. So he slipped him his AIM handle and started tutoring him.

"He was like, 'I'm tired of you getting bullied in there,'" Soul remembers. Fuller wrote a punchline and diagrammed how it worked. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the younger rapper remembers it to this day: "'Cause cats be forfeiting like their wardrobe for half of the week," he raps, overpronouncing the forfeit/four-fit wordplay. It's almost comically prototypical for rap of this style in that era; it's also exactly what he needed to focus his ef-

STYLING BY CYNTHIA SANCHEZ. HAIR BY KUZEE ANDERSON.

forts. "From there, we've been ill. I just needed a template."

His musical pursuits did not stay trapped inside. At a Carson park much like Anderson Memorial, he and his then-girlfriend, the late singer Alori Joh, were discovered at a talent show; that led to him signing with a small local label named StreetBeat when he had barely graduated high school. But it was the next contract that would reshape his life.

As Soul would rap on the introduction to 2007's *Long Term,* TDE president Terrence "Punch" Henderson "saw more in [his] music than metaphors and punchlines." The two formed a fast relationship, and Soul joined the label despite the thorniness of L.A. street politics. Years later, in his verse on Danny Brown's "Really Doe," he notes that he's "paid by the Bloods" despite being "raised by the Crips." When I ask him if his signing with TDE drew any sideways looks in his part of Carson, he says, "For sure – but I felt like the scope was larger. We saw how red and blue makes green, if you will."

Armed with the lessons learned during Watts native Jay Rock's first foray into the major-label system, as well as Compton-bred Kendrick Lamar, who was quickly becoming one of the most sought-after free agents in the industry, TDE went from local curiosity to national brand before making a serious impact on the charts. Then, in 2011, Soul, Lamar, Rock, and South Central upstart Schoolboy Q, known collectively as Black Hippy, were tapped by the L.A. indie legend Murs to go on the Paid Dues Tour. It couldn't have come sooner. While the quartet was on the road, Soul's grandparents' record store closed its doors for good. "We'd been on the verge," he says, "but it was like I got a job right when I lost another."

In 2012, Soul released *Control System,* the album that would serve as his introduction to most rap fans around the country. Though Lamar and Q had signed joint agreements with Interscope, Soul's record was issued by TDE alone. "I wasn't so much worried about the numbers," he says today of being the odd man out. "I just wanted in." But he wrote and rapped as if he resented this underestimation. (From 2011's *Longterm Mentality*: "Labels calling for everybody except for me/Like I ain't got the recipe, like this ain't my destiny.")

Much of *Control System* is venomous. Soul's punchline-first style exists on a razor's edge; his diction is so clear and pacing so languid that he ends up working to oversell underwhelming lines, or sinking deep into dorm-room philosophy ("Just imagine if Einstein got high and sipped juice"). But he is a magnetic vocalist, and the eventual effect of those conspiratorial asides is to earn Soul a place in a well-established rap lineage. He's not exactly Ras Kass, who grew up in Carson, but the two could be cousins.

Control System ends with what was – at least until this year – the best song in Soul's catalog. "The Book of Soul" chronicles his relationship with Alori Joh and his grief over her death by suicide just months before the album's release. The song is harrowing but never sentimental; Soul makes the shrewd decision to pair his raps with Tommy Black's bright, jazzy Bobby McFerrin flip. He also, finally – at the tail end of a 72-minute album – uses the conspiracy bars to wrong-foot the listener. "I guess the Mayans wasn't lying," he raps. "2012, my world ended."

When Soul talks about his life, he draws long arcs, ebbs and flows of happiness and stability. While *Control System* was a creative success and made him a dark-horse favorite among Black Hippy fans, he isn't proud of how it warped his personality. "It created a level of arrogance," he says. "I felt I had a style I'd created that the people gravitated to. I was getting recognized by my idols. That made me feel like, 'I did what I came to do.' "

Soul had always rapped about drugs, but in the mid-2010s their place in his songs became worrisome – stark revelations on pieces meant to unnerve the audience did so all too easily, and some records conceived as party fodder ended up having the same effect. ("The drank made me slow," he raps on "Gang'Nem," an early single from *Herbert,* "but my mind was on Mach 10.") "D.R.U.G.S.," from 2016's glitchy, sullen *Do What Thou Wilt.,* is sincerely upsetting; you imagine close friends, after being emailed the demo, reaching out to be sure he was OK. It sounds as if some did.

After the release of *Do What Thou Wilt.,* everyone in Soul's orbit knew it was time for a recalibration. The album "was very dark and dense," he says. "My team felt like, you know, maybe we should try some contrast. Try some brighter beats, some brighter ideas." The plan was to take a little breather, then get back in the studio to recapture some of the buoyancy that balanced out *Control System,* or push him into new territory altogether. But weeks turned to months, and before he realized it, Soul had gone more than a year without making music. "Of course, my team was on me, like, 'What's good? When're we gonna get back in?' " he remembers. But he didn't know any better than they did.

Kendrick Lamar, Jay Rock, Schoolboy Q, and Ab-Soul (from left) backstage in 2013

KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES

At some point in 2018, Ab-Soul began working, slowly, on the songs that would eventually become *Herbert*. Though he willfully shut out all contemporary rap – "I didn't want any flows, no beat selection" from anyone else to encroach on his process, he says – he invited more feedback from his inner circle than ever before. "I dropped the arrogance for this album," he explains. "I didn't argue [when someone was unimpressed by a demo]. As soon as someone was like, 'Ehh,' I pressed next – I dropped the, 'Ah, man, you didn't hear what I said?' "

"[For the new album], I wanted to challenge myself to craft freely. I didn't want to go in with a theme or a concept. It was difficult."

But, Soul says, this wholesale change to his album-making approach made it harder than expected to get back into a rhythm. "I wanted to challenge myself to just craft freely – I didn't want to go in with a theme or a concept. It was difficult." So he courted those notes from friends and collaborators; when producers asked him what sorts of beats he was looking for, he asked what they imagined him on.

This does not immediately strike one as a good idea. Crafting a comeback record – to which you've given your name as a title – by committee after a long, fraught hiatus seems destined to make it an album of compromises and dull consensus. But there is no evidence of those shortcomings on *Herbert,* which veers from warm soul to turn-of-the-century Timbaland steel, the nakedly emotive post-DJ Premier strings that trickled down through rap's underground to, well, DJ Premier, who furnishes the breakneck closer "Gotta Rap." These never feel like disparate parts; the sequencing does not smooth the transitions so much as it makes them seem instinctive. It externalizes Soul's insecurities but does not wallow – it mines his past for vivid detail without growing sentimental.

Many of these songs were completed in the two and a half years following his 2018 return to music. But finishing *Herbert* was interrupted by something far graver than lukewarm feedback to some skeletons. While he is understandably reticent to talk about it in detail, Soul confirms what is implied by the video for "Do Better" – that he attempted suicide. He does not say explicitly when this attempt occurred, but nods when I cite a lyric about 2021 being the worst year of his life. "Most of what you've heard, I wrote before… it," he says, his voice trailing off after he settles on that last word.

And so, the limp. "I just wanna make it clear: You see me smiling, but it's not funny. I think that's just been my way of healing from it, you know." Soul moves on to other topics before circling back to his gratitude for the support system that has seen him through his recovery; he gives the kind of platitudes that everyone understands are insufficient, then smiles at their insufficiency.

Finally, he returns to the notion that putting *Herbert* into the world could benefit people who are struggling. "We're all going through things, all of us," he says as we walk from the picnic table back to a different idling truck. "Me sharing my testimony – if it doesn't help, it might let you know you're not the only one going through it. That's what ultimately gives me the courage to put it out there."

Q&A

Bruce Springsteen

He's having fun paying tribute to the R&B legends of his youth – and he's not apologizing for those high ticket prices

By ANDY GREENE

SEVEN MINUTES before Bruce Springsteen is scheduled to call to talk about his new R&B-covers album, *Only the Strong Survive,* a number I've never seen before, from Point Pleasant Beach, New Jersey, pops up on my phone. "Hey," says a gruff, familiar voice at the other end of the line. "It's Bruce." He's eager to talk about how he cut the LP at his home studio in New Jersey as a way of honoring some of his favorite R&B greats from the Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties: "It started out with me saying, 'I've written songs. I've made movies. I'm sitting here in the house. I like to record. Let me go record songs that I love.' " In the next 30 minutes, we also discuss his *next* covers album, the E Street Band's 2023 tour, future archival box sets – and the widespread and intense fan uproar that followed the high ticket prices (and the use of dynamic pricing) for that upcoming tour.

You'd never done any of the songs on this album before in concert. How did you choose the track list?
I did have a record previously that I made of me singing other people's songs that wound up on the floor. It wasn't until I discovered "Do I Love You (Indeed I Do)," by Frank Wilson, the Motown rarity, and my voice slipped in perfectly, that I realized, "I should be singing soul music." . . . I was looking to make a record that had some classics on it, but also things that people may not have heard. So I chose [songs like Dobie Gray's 2001 single] "Soul Days." [The Commodores'] "Nightshift" was a big hit, but it was 1985. I chose ones I liked at the end of the day, and what I can sing well.

Were you trying to avoid super-iconic songs like "My Girl" and "Dancing in the Street"?
I thought about doing both of those. I actually recorded "My Girl." My attitude is, "The reason everyone knows this song is because it's a great, great song. If I can strip away the parts that people have gotten used to and make a great record out of it again, people will hear that song in a fresh way."

When that works, we put it on the record. When that doesn't work, it goes to the floor. "I Wish It Would Rain," you've gotta be nuts to try and sing that song after David Ruffin sang it [*laughs*]. But I found my own little part of it, and it was such a beautiful song. I found the hurt and the human emotion in it.

Did this project give you an even greater respect for the craftsmanship of these Motown songs?
These songs should be part of the American Songbook, just like Gershwin and Cole Porter. They should be current. They're incredibly written. They were amazingly recorded for their time, but you can really beef the recordings up now in a way you couldn't in 1965 or 1970. You can get a full sound on these arrangements that gives them a lot of power. That's what we've enjoyed doing.

There are guys like Jerry Butler and William Bell and Walter Orange from the Commodores who are still alive and really deserve such a bigger spotlight. You're giving it to them.
It's nice to be able to do that. I got into Jerry Butler over the past six months in a way I never had before. I realized what a great singer and stylist he was. But all these artists should have second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth lives. These are records that should be popular forever. For me, it was just fun to do. It was a project of pure pleasure.

Do you think that not screaming in front of a loud rock band the past few years has given your voice a rest and allowed you to do new things with it?
That's interesting. I don't know. Generally, my voice has stayed strong and not given me any problems for 50, 60 years now. But not singing really hard and heavy might have given me a little extra range in this break. That's possible. But also, it's interesting music. It's usually so mild during the verse, and then when the chorus hits, the singers push a little harder and get a little dirt and grit in their voices, like on "Turn Back the Hands of Time."

This project is subtitled *Covers Volume 1.* That really invites the question: Is a *Volume 2* coming?
Volume 2 is probably three-quarters recorded. It's very similar. I continued working in soul music because I was having so much fun. But I thought of doing a series of these records in a variety of different genres with songs that I love. That's because in the moment, I'm not writing. I might not write in a while. That's very normal for me. I had that great output that happened during *Letter to You.* I always know after something like that happens, I might not write for a while. But this time, fans don't have to wait four years for me to make another record.

So you might change genres soon and try out British Invasion songs or something like that?
Yeah. I would love to do country music. I would love to do a rock record. There's just so many different things, and all focused around my voice, all focused around how well I'm singing. I'd like to use this time when I'm not writing to focus on my vocals.

You haven't played a full rock concert in nearly six years. Are you itching to get back onstage again in February?
Oh, yeah. Definitely! Love the E Street Band. Can't wait to get onstage with them.

DANNY CLINCH

Come 2025, it'll be 50 years together. Those are my guys, greatest band I've ever played with. We do something that's totally unique. I'm extremely excited to see Max [Weinberg] behind me again, and Roy [Bittan] on the keyboard, and Garry [Tallent] on the bass, and Steve [Van Zandt] to my side, and Nils [Lofgren] to my side, and Patti [Scialfa] . . . everybody there. It's going to be a great time.

The last time the band toured, some shows were more than four hours long. Might that happen again?
That was by accident. I never tell the band, "We're going to play four hours tonight." They'd look at me like, "Oh, my God." That's why when my voice is sick, they never like to see me take a steroid. They know I'm going to go insane to where three and a half hours feels like nothing and I just keep going. But I'm expecting the show to run somewhere near three hours.

The ticket sales for that tour caused a bit of an uproar because some of the tickets used dynamic prices, and some tickets hit $5,000. Did you know about those price points in advance, and do you have any regrets about that?
What I do is a very simple thing. I tell my guys, "Go out and see what everybody else is doing. Let's charge a little less." That's generally the directions. They go out and set it up. For the past 49 years, or however long we've been playing, we've pretty much been out there under market value. I've enjoyed that. It's been great for the fans.

This time I told them, "Hey, we're 73 years old. The guys are there. I want to do what everybody else is doing, my peers." So that's what they did [*laughs*]. But ticket buying's gotten very confusing, not just for the fans, but for the artists also. And the bottom line is that most of our tickets are totally affordable. We have those tickets that are going to go for that [higher] price somewhere anyway. The ticket broker or someone is going to be taking that money. I'm going, "Hey, why shouldn't that money go to the guys that are going to be up there sweating three hours a night for it?"

Springsteen singing soul music on *The Tonight Show* in November.

So at that point, we went for it. I know it was unpopular with some fans. But if there's any complaints on the way out, you can have your money back.

As you said, the fans were pretty upset. The fan publication *Backstreets* said it caused them to suffer a "crisis of faith," and wrote an op-ed saying that dynamic pricing "violates an implicit contract between Bruce Springsteen and his fans." How did you feel about all that blowback against you?
Well, I'm old. I take a lot of things in stride [*laughs*]. You don't like to be criticized. You certainly don't like to be the poster boy for high ticket prices. It's the last thing you prefer to be. But that's how it went. You have to own the decisions you have made and go out and just continue to do your best. I think if folks come to the show, they're going to have a good time.

"Why shouldn't that [ticket] money go to the guys that are going to be up there sweating three hours a night? I know it was unpopular. But if there's any complaints on the way out, you can have your money back."

Do you think in the future you'll avoid using dynamic pricing, where the prices change in front of your eyes during the initial sale?
I don't know. I think in the future, we'll be talking about it, of course [*laughs*]. It changes from tour to tour. We will be coming back. I'm sure we'll be playing outside somewhat. That'll be a whole other discussion when that comes around. I don't want to say anything now, but we'll see what happens.

There have been lots of rumors about a sort of *Tracks 2* box set with a bunch of your unreleased albums on it. Are you planning that?
Yes. I have a box set of five unreleased albums that are basically post-1988. People look at my work in the Nineties and they go, "The Nineties wasn't a great decade for Bruce. He wasn't in the E Street Band . . ." I actually made a lot of music during that period of time. I actually made albums. For one reason or another – the timing wasn't right or whatever – I didn't put them out. I spent time over one of the past winters completely cleaning out the vault. I have a series of *Tracks* albums that eventually we'll release. It'll give people a chance to reassess what I was doing during that time period. Also, a lot of the stuff is really weird. I can't wait to see the response to some of it [*laughs*].

I've been reading about this mythical drum-loop album for years.
That's going to be as weird as people think it's going to be [*laughs*]. It uses all drum loops and things like that, and it uses synthesizers. I like the record myself.

I've heard rumors of a *Born in the U.S.A.* box set. Are you working on that?
No. I have not done anything on a *Born in the U.S.A.* box set. First of all, what people need to understand is that most of the *Born in the U.S.A.* great outtakes are out there on *Tracks 1.* The stuff we have left either isn't very good or there isn't any of it. I'm not sure which. We're hoarding no secrets. When the time comes around, we'll see what's there. But I don't see a big *Born in the U.S.A.* box set like there was with *Darkness* or *The River.*

How about *Nebraska*? I've heard some pretty amazing bootlegs with different versions of those songs.
That's a possibility. Myself, I'm not big on "Let me hear the song six ways to Sunday." I like to hear the song the way it was finished. The box sets with 10 million versions of one song, I don't listen to them. But maybe I'm a different kind of listener. I'm sure someone is looking into *Nebraska* to see what's there. If something is there, we'll put it out.

You've been putting out a concert bootleg every month online, but there hasn't been much pre-1975. Are you opposed to putting out anything by Steel Mill or the Bruce Springsteen Band, the really early days?
Not really. If they can find something pre-'75 . . . I wouldn't mind them putting out some Steel Mill shows. They're not going to sound great, but you'll certainly get an idea of what I was whacking away at at the time. I'll look into it. If there's some good Steel Mill shows, I'll get them to put some out.

Seeing you perform on Jimmy Fallon's show with original E Street Band keyboardist David Sancious recently was a treat. It made me wonder what would have happened if he and drummer Ernest "Boom" Carter had stayed in the band.
Boom started out as a jazz drummer, really, but very, very quickly picked up his rock & roll chops due to the fact that he was put in extreme pressure when he got in the band. The way it happened was [drummer] Vini Lopez left the band and we had a gig the next night. I had to play it, because it was a Mob-owned club [*laughs*]. They were throwing some impolite suggestions in our direction about what they'd do if we didn't show up. That night, David said, "I've got a friend named Boom." And so Boom comes over, spends the entire night learning the entire set. That was Boom's induction by fire. After that, he always swung . . . but he grabbed enough of a rock edge to make that work. And he *would* have worked. The band might have swung in a slightly different way and been more comfortable with the sound of the music we played at *Fallon,* probably.

TODD OWYOUNG/NBC

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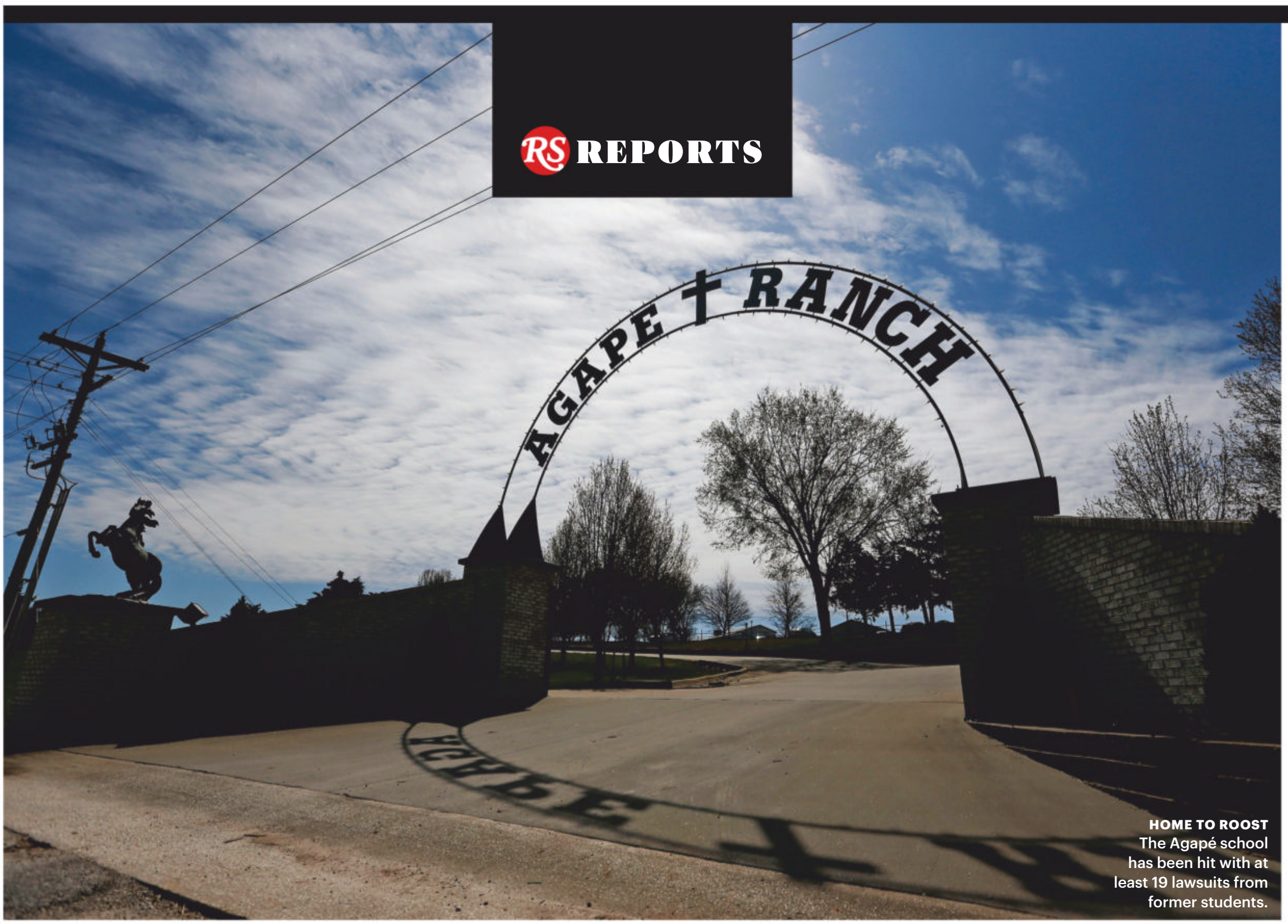

HOME TO ROOST
The Agapé school has been hit with at least 19 lawsuits from former students.

God's School From Hell

At Missouri's Agapé school, a devout Baptist boarding facility for boys, students claim their treatment bordered on torture

By ADAM PIORE

WHEN Andrew Breshears arrived at the Agapé Boarding School in 2018, he was a sandy-haired 12-year-old who weighed less than 100 pounds. He enjoyed watching movies, listening to Elvis, and playing soccer with his friends. "I was sheltered," Breshears says. But he struggled at home. When he was told he couldn't live with his mother after her stint in rehab, he threatened to kill himself, and another person from the household. His grandparents sent him to a mental hospital, then to Agapé.

At first glance, the facility for "at-risk and unmotivated boys" – a Baptist institution in Stockton, Missouri – wasn't so terrible. Passing under the majestic cross affixed to its towering arched entryway, Breshears gazed over a beautiful campus. The foothills of the Ozarks sat in the distance. There were horses, a swimming pool, and a football team. It appeared to be a vast improvement over his previous digs.

But Breshears got a rude welcome. Right away, staff shaved his head, handed him an orange shirt and a pair of Wranglers, moved him into a dorm that looked like Marine barracks, and introduced him to a dizzying litany of rules. Chapel was daily. Church was on Wednesday and three times on Sunday. Hymns blared in the classrooms.

To keep order, Agapé instituted a military-like hierarchy, indicated by colored shirts that denoted ranks. The fastest way for a student to attain a coveted burgundy or red shirt, Breshears soon learned, was to embrace the Lord and help Brother Bryan – Bryan Clemensen, the school's co-founder and eventual director and principal – enforce the rules. That meant calling out and even disciplining classmates for infractions like cursing, talking in line, refusing to pledge allegiance to the Christian flag, or talking about their pasts. It was easy to get in trouble for "stupid shit," Breshears recalls.

Punishments allegedly ranged from calisthenics to "wall time," where kids stood with their foreheads and noses touching the wall, except when sleeping, doing schoolwork, or eating. It could last for days on end. When more severe penalties were required, according to students, civil suits, and a search warrant filed later by state investigators, Agapé staffers would hold the boys facedown on the floor while pressing their elbows, knees, and fingers into students' pressure points, a "pain compliance" method known as a "restraint." Or worse. Former students say Clemensen, a paunchy middle-aged man with a buzz cut, a soft chin, and a stern manner, had a technique that he called "Jurassic Elbow" – which entailed slamming his elbow into the back of a student's skull, face, ribs, or down between the shoulder blades. (Clemensen says this was a nickname the boys had for an elbow injury, and denies the abuse.) These punishments, former students say, were often administered in a small room down a dark staircase, in the basement of the church, with blue padded floors and holes punched in the wall. Staff called

ADAM PIORE *is the author of "New Kings of New York," out now.*

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it the "intake" or "restraint" room. Students called it the "Padded Palace."

For a time, Breshears stayed out of trouble. But he would soon come to suffer horrifying abuse, he says – experiences in line with what at least 18 former Agapé students have recently alleged in lawsuits. The state attorney general's office claims that Agapé staff threw students into walls, pushed them to the ground, ordered them to perform 1,000 pushups, intentionally starved them, and forced them to sleep in handcuffs and wear them for as long as eight days. In civil suits, Agapé students describe being choked with rebar and electrical cords, pushed through drywall, having their noses broken, and hit in the testicles hard enough to cause "traumatic groin injury." They say several boys attempted to hang themselves, in what they call a "pandemic among students." Agapé, through its attorney, denies the allegations, and says that no student there has ever killed himself.

The Agapé case is just the latest scandal to emerge from the billion-dollar "troubled-teen industry," a loosely regulated network of therapeutic boarding schools, residential treatment centers, religious academies, and wilderness camps set up to help teenagers with drug addiction and behavioral problems. Many of these programs, which are estimated to serve as many as 200,000 kids at any one time, are allowed to operate with virtual impunity, thanks to federal inaction and permissive state laws. A 2007 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office found thousands of abuse allegations between 1990 and 2007 – in 2005 alone, 33 states reported 1,619 staff members involved in incidents of abuse. The report, which also examined 10 cases where teenagers had died, noted that "there are currently no federal laws that define and regulate residential treatment programs."

More than a decade later, legislators are finally making headway. In 2021, Paris Hilton, who has also been lobbying in Washington D.C., testified at a Utah Senate committee hearing about her own experience in a troubled-teen facility there, alleging that she was "verbally, mentally, and physically abused," involuntarily drugged, and locked in isolation. Meanwhile, tales of abuse continue to emerge. Just last summer, former students at a pair of Wyoming ranches alleged in an NBC investigation that they had been forced to perform backbreaking manual labor and subjected to traumatic physical and emotional abuse. One student said staffers had branded him with a cross.

Still, administrators at many of these schools insist they are a force for good. When speaking with ROLLING STONE, Clemensen denied the allegations against him and explained his approach to reform. "It's about getting these kids to a place in their life where they have to look to God for help," he says. "Where they stop looking to drugs, or their friends, and say to God, 'I need your help to feel better.' If you don't save their souls, it ain't going to stick."

A LONELY PLACE
Clockwise from top: Andrew Breshears in his Agapé uniform; students oversee a classmate doing pushups in 2002; James Clemensen, who co-founded the school in 1990; Colton Schrag, who attended Agapé twice between 2004 and 2010; Bryan Clemensen, who has become a face of the scandal.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF JENNIFER BRESHEARS; KAREN ELSHOUT/"ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH"/MEGA AGENCY; COURTESY OF "THE CEDAR COUNTY REPUBLICAN"; AGAPÉ BOARDING SCHOOL FOR BOYS; COURTESY OF COLTON SCHRAG

TOUGH-LOVE SCHOOLS can be traced back to the 1950s, when a secular group called Synanon pioneered an approach to curing heroin addiction with isolation, humiliation, and sleep deprivation. Agapé, which according to its parent handbook costs $39,000 a year, is also influenced by Lester Roloff, a radio evangelist and pastor who founded schools for teenage girls in the late 1960s that relied on physical abuse and immersion in biblical teachings to reform them.

Missouri has been a particular hotbed for religious schools since 1982, when the state passed a law exempting faith-based residential child-care facilities from state oversight. Today, it's home to at least 28 such institutions, though some estimates place the number at upward of 100, many of which are still operating under the radar.

In recent months, Clemensen has become the face of the controversy – a fearless leader doing God's work to those fighting to save his school, a sadistic villain to those who aim to close it. Former students and their attorneys allege that for years Clemensen has been a toxic presence at the school, encouraging his staff to use violence to maintain order. It was Clemensen who introduced the practice of restraints in the early 2000s, says Ryan Frazier, attorney for Monsees and Mayer PC, which is representing 18 former students in suits against the school.

"He ran the school on fear," says Colton Schrag, a former gang associate who attended the school twice between 2004 and 2010, and is not suing because the statute of limitations has expired. "I watched him choke, slam kids into the floor, and just basically beat the shit out of them. He smacked me in the face with his elbow for say-

ing the f-word. And he encouraged that kind of crap from staff members."

In an interview with ROLLING STONE, Clemensen said that the abuse allegations are lies, and suggests they are inspired by the political ambitions of State Attorney General Eric Schmidt – who was elected to the U.S. Senate in November – and a small group of disgruntled former students "hoping for a big payday." "What they are claiming would never be OK," he says. "We've had 6,000 students and only a small percent are making these claims, and I could give you the names of many who thank me." ROLLING STONE contacted one of them, Matt Carlson, who says he spent the better part of a year at Agapé in the early 2000s. Carlson said he never witnessed abuse and credited the school with temporarily keeping him off meth and teaching him how to lay tile.

In response to a detailed list of follow-up questions, Clemensen, through Agapé's attorney, says he "has never abused any boy in the history of Agapé," and denied that restraints were ever used for punishment. Clemensen, who left the school from 2008 to 2018, says he has two master's degrees, in education and counseling and psychology, and "would challenge the boys' thinking processes, and he still does that to this day."

Breshears and others paint a different picture. They claim Clemensen was on a power trip and seemed to enjoy brutalizing the kids in his charge. He is "a manipulator," says Breshears. "He likes to get in people's heads."

Whatever the case, Clemensen has many allies where it perhaps counts the most: in the community. Cedar County, Missouri, where Agapé is located, is in the heart of the Bible Belt – and Clemensen, his stepfather, Jim, who died in October 2021, and his mother, Kathy, long ago convinced the locals they answer to a higher authority.

The way Bryan tells it, in the 1970s, Kathy was a single mom who'd found Jesus but still had a mischievous streak. James Clemensen was a California State Highway patrolman with a "death wish" so extreme the wives of his fellow troopers forbade their husbands from hanging out with him.

The couple met when Jim pulled Kathy over for drag racing a beat-up Ford Pinto around the East Bay. Within months, Jim was both saved and married, and Bryan had a new stepdad. Sick with a heart condition, Jim left the force in 1979 and moved Kathy, Bryan, and his siblings to Stockton, a sweltering agricultural city on the once-mighty San Joaquin River. Throughout the 1980s, Kathy and Jim fostered children whose parents were in jail. Bryan, by then in his twenties, was working in a state-funded group home. "Many of the kids my parents took in would be back six months later in worse shape," Bryan says. "We felt they needed God in their lives." The state, he says, "had no clue how to get to a kid's heart."

So they constructed wooden bunks on the second floor of their modest home, set up cubicles in the garage, and obtained work booklets produced by Accelerated Christian Education. The curriculum included traditional math and English. It also taught creationism and that women should be subservient to their husbands, while weaving biblical references into the materials. They called the school Agapé, meaning God's love for man.

In 1991, Todd Bindley, then 13, moved in. He liked Metallica and Garbage Pail Kids cards, and had a tendency to cause trouble. His religious mother wasn't having it. "She thought heavy metal was like witchcraft," he says. One night, he got into an argument with his mom and stepdad that turned physical, and they accused him of being possessed. That was the last straw; they had him committed. Jim and Kathy appeared at the hospital a few weeks later. "They said that they were bringing me to my parents," he says. Once in the car, Bindley says, they took him to their home.

A BROKEN FAMILY
Above: Boyd and Stephanie Householder, who own Circle of Hope Girls' Ranch, have been accused of abuse in numerous lawsuits, including one filed by their daughter Amanda (left). They deny all charges.

Bindley remembers learning quickly that retribution for breaking the rules was swift and sometimes painful. One morning, he overheard one of the Clemensen daughters asking for help with a math problem, to which Bindley shot back a smartass remark. Moments later, Bindley says, Bryan yanked him backward, slamming his chair – and his head – into the concrete floor. (Clemensen denies this happened, but says he considers Bindley one of Agapé's "top success stories.")

Meanwhile, Agapé was growing. In 1992, the Clemensens announced to their troubled wards that they were moving to a promised land of sorts: an old Air Force base six miles outside of tiny Othello, Washington.

There, according to Bindley, he was put to work painting, roofing, and helping to dismantle a web of lead pipes covered in asbestos, which he was told to carry to the top of a hill and throw into a pit used to burn garbage. Within a few months, he says, three students ran away. He says one told local police that he had escaped from a "Nazi camp."

In 1995, county officials shut them down after health inspectors found the school – which by then had 140 students and 25 staffers – had rotting food, holes in the walls large enough to allow rodents to enter, and exposed wiring. The site was littered with old barrels, wood piles, abandoned cars, and insulation containing asbestos. Seven boys tested positive for tuberculosis. The criminal division of the EPA investigated and charged Jim Clemensen for improperly disposing of hazardous material. "I have concerns about every inch of that place," County Commissioner Sue Miller said.

It was time to go. The Clemensens sent 100 boys home, and moved the rest to base housing. Soon they'd be in a place where they were untouchable.

IN THE MONTHS after his arrival, Breshears' feelings about Agapé changed. "When I first got there, I just stayed on the low, trying to do my best, hoping to get out," he says. "They promoted me – I was the youngest person to go red. And I did get saved."

But then, Breshears made friends and began to reconsider his allegiances – particularly, he says, after he witnessed classmates getting restrained. To him, it seemed arbitrary and needlessly brutal. His outrage became open defiance. By 14, Breshears says, he was fully in staffers' crosshairs.

He says he was once ordered to perform 4,500 pushups for cussing and told if "I didn't get it done, I couldn't eat my next meal." (Though Breshears says he couldn't do it, Agapé denies ever denying a student a meal.) He lost his red shirt and became familiar with the one place no student wanted to end up: "Brown Town." That status, characterized by the brown shirt a student was forced to wear, according to lawsuits and depositions, came with extreme workouts, the loss of talking privileges, and a restricted meal plan that often consisted of a slice of bread and peanut butter, or a tortilla with a scoop of cold refried beans. And they would never tell you how long your stay in Brown Town will be, Breshears says.

The staff often singled out members of Brown Town for abuse, depositions filed by former Agapé students suggest. One student, identified only by his initials, describes being forced to run outside while a staffer tailed him in a four-wheeler with a stick attached to the front, threatening to ram anyone who wasn't moving fast enough. Another describes a staffer holding a pocket knife to his throat. (Agapé denies any knowledge of these allegations.)

Such alleged retribution was not necessarily confined to Brown Town. One deposed student describes attempting to jump off a staircase at Agapé in a gesture of suicidal desperation – which prompted a staffer to grab him, throw him six feet across the floor, sit on his

FROM TOP: © DONNA BAXTER/"THE NEWS-LEADER"/USA TODAY NETWORK; COURTESY OF AMANDA HOUSEHOLDER

back, and bash his head into the floor multiple times, leaving him in a pile of snot and blood, while screaming, "Is this what you want?" (Agapé confirms restraining the student, but says it was "not a form of abuse but an attempt to prevent harm to the boy.") Another former student said under oath that he was yanked out of bed and slammed to the floor for waking up late, kicked and punched in the balls by former dean of students Julio Sandoval, and kicked in the ribs and face in front of the rest of the school by Bryan Clemensen. (Agapé denies these allegations.)

Other students describe staffers encouraging classmates to fight one another, and cutting off communication with loved ones when they complained. "They would put you down," says Breshears. "They would say, 'You're nothing. You're dirtbags, you're hoodlums. You're never gonna make it out.'"

MANY OF THE ALLEGATIONS against Agapé staffers are easily found on podcasts and interviews on YouTube. Yet Agapé's neighbors insist they never had any idea. Indeed, the version of the school students describe, community members say, is starkly different from the Agapé the town has come to know.

Stockton is located 130 miles south of Kansas City, a lazy drive down sun-baked roads lined with oak forests and rolling fields. Home to a population of 1,600, it has a tiny main square, the world's largest processor of eastern black walnuts, and 21 churches.

Though the area is largely Baptist, Cedar County has a tradition of religious tolerance. On the wooded roads near Agapé, Amish men drive horse-drawn buggies; hundreds of members of the polygamous Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints live on a nearby compound called "the Ranch."

In 1996, the Clemensens purchased 40 acres just outside of town. The site, designed as a Christian camp, had cabins, a shower facility, a mess hall, and a small chapel. They moved their wards in and set them to work clearing the site and fixing the property. Locals says the Clemensens ingratiated themselves by offering tours, and hosting Boy Scout breakfasts and luncheons for the local Methodist group. They held a blood drive, organized a Fourth of July fireworks spectacular, and began holding an annual rodeo. They insisted everyone call them "Brother Jim" and "Ma'am," and their son "Brother Bryan."

They have law-enforcement ties, too. According to AG [*Cont. on 76*]

RICK BOWMER/AP IMAGES

PARIS ON A MISSION Paris Hilton joins demonstrators near the Provo Canyon School to protest alleged abuses at the teen-care facility.

A TROUBLED INDUSTRY FOR TROUBLED TEENS

Each year, thousands of parents pay to have their children taken to treatment programs, often by force. While formats vary — from survival courses to ranches to boarding schools — they all promise the same thing: to scare wayward kids straight with "tough love." But for years, students who've come through those programs have alleged that they endured abuse. Here, five schools in the billion-dollar industry whose practices have faced scrutiny.

Provo Canyon School

PROVO, UTAH
1971–PRESENT

In the 2020 documentary *This Is Paris,* Paris Hilton revealed how she continues to have nightmares about being kidnapped from her bed at 16 and taken to Provo Canyon School. "To this day I am still traumatized," she said. Hilton claimed she'd been medicated against her will, and was forced, nude, into solitary confinement when leadership found out she'd stopped taking the meds. She has since joined others who allege similar abuses to advocate to reform teen-care facilities. "I think the only way to have these nightmares stop is to do something about it," she said in the doc. The school changed ownership in 2000 (after Hilton attended) and has said confinement and medication are not used to discipline students.

Circle of Hope Girls' Ranch

HUMANSVILLE, MISSOURI
2006–20

Founded by former Agapé staffers Boyd and Stephanie Householder in 2006, Circle of Hope was marketed as an academically rigorous Christian school that would "help each child to become a God-honoring and parent-honoring young person," but students claimed they were sexually abused, handcuffed, and force-fed. The school caught national attention in 2020, when survivors began posting allegations of abuse on TikTok. The Householders have settled multiple lawsuits brought by victims and face more, including one from daughter Amanda Householder. The couple will face trial for more than 100 counts of felony child crimes. Their lawyer denies the allegations and says "their innocence will prevail."

Élan School

POLAND, MAINE
1970–2011

At one of the nation's most notorious therapeutic boarding schools, students endured strict rules, humiliating punishments, and "attack therapy," which uses confrontation as treatment. In so-called General Meetings, students would take turns berating one person about their flaws. In 1982, 15-year-old Phil Williams Jr. died of a brain aneurysm after reportedly being forced to box another student. No charges were filed in his death. Élan shut down in 2011, after a Reddit thread of abuse allegations went viral. The school's owner blamed the online campaign, which she called "false attacks," for the school's declining enrollment and financial problems.

Turn-About Ranch

ESCALANTE, UTAH
1989–PRESENT

In 2021, Bhad Bhabie posted a video on her YouTube channel about being sent to the Turn-About Ranch after her appearance on *Dr. Phil*. "They strip you from your whole personality," she said. She claimed she was forced to stay awake for days and do manual labor while being denied a bed and decent meals. The 100-day program promises to teach "leadership, teamwork, accountability, and responsibility." Multiple alumni have sued, alleging abuse. A 2012 lawsuit claimed a teen girl had been subjected to "torture" by "sadists and psychopaths"; it was dismissed due to a statute-of-limitations violation. In 2021, an alum sued Phil McGraw and CBS for sending her there, claiming she'd been groped by a staffer. A judge dismissed the suit. Dr. Phil responded to Bhad Bhabie's claims, saying the show is "not involved" in what happens after a guest leaves the stage, and Turn-About denied the allegations in the 2021 lawsuit, saying it had taken them seriously at the time of the incident.

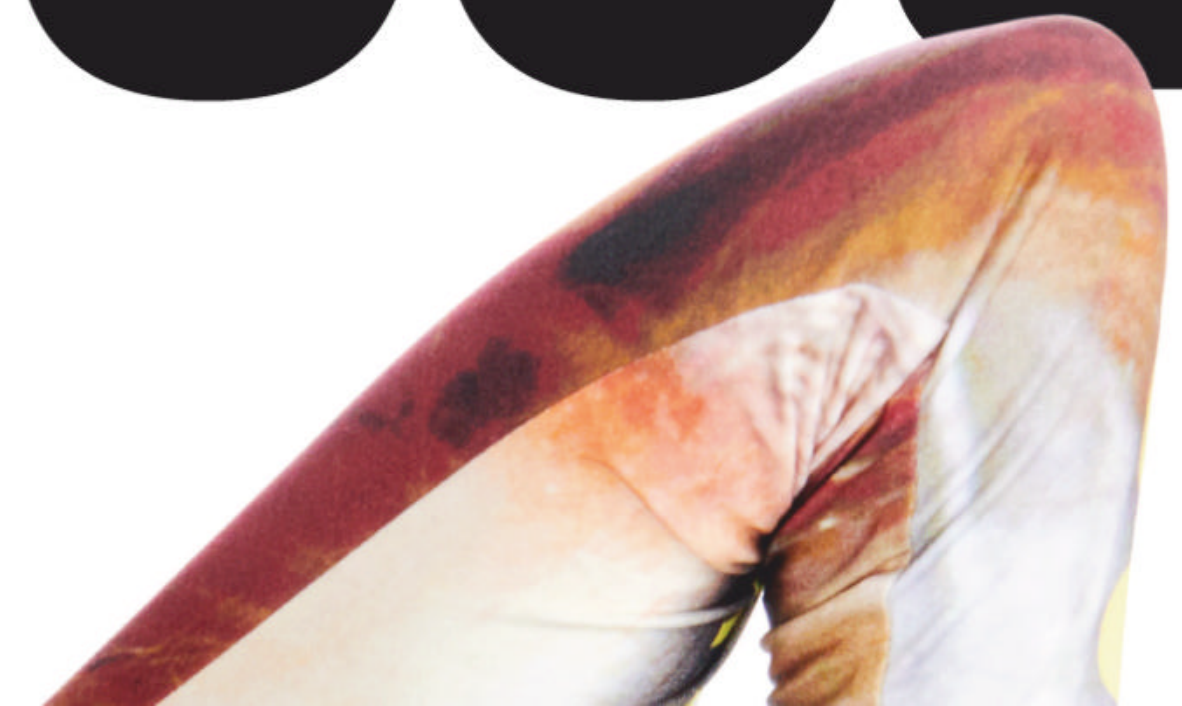
Trinity Teen Solutions and Triangle Cross Ranch

POWELL, WYOMING
2002–22; 1996–PRESENT

At these girls and boys ranches, owned by the same family in rural Wyoming, former residents describe being forced to do heavy manual labor and being tied to a goat by a leash as punishment. Previous state inspections found that girls had been kept from using the bathroom and forced to wet themselves. One resident from the boys ranch alleged he'd been branded with a cross. Under pressure from increasingly public allegations and a recent NBC News investigation, the girls ranch, Trinity, abruptly ceased operations in October. The ranch's leadership denies the accusations and says, "Reported allegations of abuse have been investigated and [found to be] unsubstantiated." Triangle Cross Ranch remains operational. **ANDREA MARKS**

ROSALÍA

IS PLAYING HER OWN GAME



PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JOSEFINA BIETTI

How pop's most unconventional superstar made a name for herself

BY CAT CARDENAS

IT'S

HOURS AFTER a sudden rainstorm one afternoon in September, and Rosalía is standing with her eyes trained on the placid shore of Puerto Rico's Bahia Beach. She's still for just a few seconds, but her mind is stuck on the pure chaos of the previous night.

"*Dios mio,* it was crazy," she says, with an edge of gleeful disbelief.

First off, let's not call it a concert. For almost two hours straight, she played for a sold-out crowd at the historic Coliseo de Puerto Rico José Miguel Agrelot. Aside from waves of screaming fans, the spectacle Rosalía put on is more akin to performance art than a traditional stadium show, and it's taken over cities and social media pages with equal force over the past few months. There's no opener, no costume changes. Rosalía is at the center, her face often slicked with sweat and tears, doing everything all at once – strumming a jet-black guitar, smacking her gum, pounding an ornate piano, ripping her heart wide open. And as her *Motomami* World Tour has crossed the globe, this has been her life for the past year.

Her show in Puerto Rico was an all-out rager. Assigned seats were meaningless as security guards roamed the floor, trying – and failing – to stop people from spilling into the aisles. The arena seemed like it was going to collapse in on itself when Rosalía shouted to the crowd, "The love of my life is here!" referring to her boyfriend, the Puerto Rican star Rauw Alejandro. After it was all over, she still found the energy to hit an afterparty at a San Juan nightclub with Rauw. A tangle of iPhone cameras captured them dancing to different hits, including Rosalía's own "Despechá," late into the night.

Even so, the next morning, when I arrive at her private oceanfront villa in the St. Regis, where a few of her friends are milling around, she's bright and alert, wearing a navy-blue minidress with a youthful Peter Pan collar. I have a million things I want to ask, yet it's Rosalía who immediately starts peppering me with questions before I get the chance.

"OK," she says eagerly, her eyes lighting up with genuine curiosity. "Tell me everything. How did you feel about last night? This was your first time seeing a show, yes? What did you think? I want to know."

I quickly fill her in, telling her the only other performance of hers I've seen was at Austin City Limits, in 2019. Back then, Rosalía was coming off the breakthrough success of *El Mal Querer,* the intricate concept album she released in 2018. Suddenly, a promising young graduate of Barcelona's Catalonia College of Music, who'd dedicated most of her life to the punishing art of flamenco, morphed into a boundary-pulverizing avant-fusionist, one known for her encyclopedic range of cultural references, who interpolated Justin Timberlake, exploded into *cante jondo,* and cited an Occitan novel about a toxic relationship all on the same project (the novel – called *The Story of Flamenca* – actually inspired the entire album, which was her college thesis).

But if listeners were anticipating more baroque flamenco theater after *El Mal Querer*, Rosalía swerved, leaping into collaborations with reggaeton and hip-hop artists like J Balvin, Travis Scott, and Ozuna over the next couple of years. Some were mesmerized by her chameleonic abilities, seeing her wide-ranging trajectory as a brave and prophetic vision of a world without boundaries. To others, her approach was an unabashed form of appropriation that highlighted her privilege. She was also weird and playful and hard to pin down: Here you had a disciplined musician, intense about her love of high art and classical influences, but well-versed in the internet and down to bullshit around online, posting bored Insta-baddie selfies, twerking on TikTok, sharing photos of her hangs with the Kardashians, and embracing silly social media trends.

No matter how people felt, they were watching her, fixated on her next move. Sure, she could have cranked out a quick follow-up album that kept her momentum going and expanded her pop potential. But Rosalía, who's taken creative cues from inspirations like Björk, Kate Bush, and Lauryn Hill, made it clear from the beginning that outside noise wasn't going to dictate her creative process. "I'd never want to put out records with a sense of urgency, or with the pressure of 'Oh, it's been X years,'" she says. "I don't think I'm going to be that type of artist. I think I'm always going to make music when I feel like I have something to say."

For three years, she worked on an album that was constantly evolving. It started as a kind of protest against any expectations placed on her after *El Mal Querer,* but it also confronted disorienting changes happening in her personal life: For months, the pandemic kept her an ocean away from her family in Barcelona while she recorded in the U.S. At the same time, she was grappling with fame, having gone from an independent artist with no ties to the industry and no clear path forward to a star facing constant attention and heightened scrutiny. "I didn't grow up like this," she tells me. "It's something new for me in my life, and I think because I'm not used to it, I was kind of like, 'How do I feel about this?'"

Meanwhile, she fell in love. Since 2020, fans had been linking her and Rauw together, analyzing every social media interaction and scouring their pictures for tiny clues: maybe a parking lot they'd both been photographed in, a fraction of Rauw's hand in the background of an image. The couple did their best to keep their relationship private, despite mounting speculation and even harassment. (As Rauw told ROLLING STONE a year ago, they decided to go public after paparazzi cornered them at a restaurant. "I was like, 'Yo. What are we gonna do?' And she told me, 'You know what? I'm tired of this shit.'")

Finally, in March, she released *Motomami*, a collision of styles and genres that packed all of the commotion around her into one ballsy, brilliant statement. The tumult she felt was in the eerie excess of "La Combi Versace," painting a picture of nouveau riche wealth over a hauntingly sparse dembow arrangement; it was in the discordant combination of jazz and reggaeton in her tribute to legends Daddy Yankee and Wisin on "Saoko," where she raps about her right to transform and contradict herself.

"It's a chaotic record," she says with a laugh. "I wanted the record to feel like an emotional roller coaster, which is what I was feeling at that point in my life. I wanted that dynamic, that constant sensation of *toma y daca,* give and take."

Motomami was a genuine pop surprise. David Byrne, perhaps seeing a kindred weirdo in her eclecticism, built an entire playlist inspired by a show she did at New York's Radio City Music Hall. Lorde covered the positively lewd ballad "Hentai" at a concert in New York. Cardi B – who, along with Megan Thee

"She's like water," says one producer. "That's what you want in an artist — to be adaptable, to bend without breaking, and move fluidly."

CAT CARDENAS *is a writer based in Austin. This is her first cover story for* ROLLING STONE.

PRODUCED BY CLARA DORIA AND CELESTE SANTO DOMINGO. PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. HAIR BY JESUS GUERRERO AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY RAISA FLOWERS FOR E.D.M.A. MANICURE BY EMMA REEVES. FASHION DIRECTION BY ZAIRA VEGA. MARKET EDITOR EMILY MERCER. STYLING BY JOAQUIN DIAZ. SET DESIGN BY CAMILO DIAZ SALAMANCA. RETOUCHING BY BRUNO REZENDE. LIGHTING DESIGN BY IGNACIO VAELLO AND LAURA ROLDÁN FOR BUENDÍA ESTUDIO.

PREVIOUS SPREAD

T-SHIRT BY **COWBOYS OF HABIT.**
SUNGLASSES BY **DIOR.**
SKIRT, STYLIST'S OWN.
THONG BY **VANEBON.**

THIS PAGE

JACKET BY **RICK OWENS.**

JACKET AND PANTS BY **GERRIT JACOB**. SHOES BY **BALENCIAGA**. THONG BY **VANEBON**.

Stallion, had Rosalía make a cameo in the "WAP" video – raved about the record on Twitter ("soooo fireeee," she told her 22 million followers). Bigger industry praise came more recently: *Motomami* earned two Grammy nominations and won Album of the Year at the Latin Grammys in November, crystallizing Rosalía's place as the heady queen of global pop and an uninhibited provocateur, pulling from kitsch camp to sacrosanct traditions without fear of consequence.

"She's like water," says Noah Goldstein, the Grammy Award-winning producer and engineer who worked with her on *Motomami*. "That's what you want in an artist – for them to be as adaptable as possible, to bend without breaking, and move fluidly. She's super hands-on, and that fluidity translates to the way she produces."

Even on a beach in Puerto Rico, the gears in Rosalía's mind are always furiously turning, transcending. In one conversation, she flips between English and Spanish, sometimes grasping for a word in her native Catalan. She references funny TikTok dances before mentioning the musings of a 17th-century French poet and philosopher, trying to get my help in remembering his name (which I would never know).

She's been living light-years ahead of everyone else, her mind full of concepts she wants to try and goals she wants to achieve and destinations she wants to reach. Right now, there's one place she wants to go: "Should we see the beach?" she asks, having just realized the villa has private access. Within a few seconds, she takes the lead, and soon the Atlantic washes over her black Balenciaga crocs. Despite everything bouncing around in her head, she genuinely feels grounded right now, even with the next show, the next city, the next big idea looming. "I feel really anchored, more than any other time in my life," she says. "I'm really trying to just enjoy what's happening in every moment."

ROSALÍA THROWS HERSELF into the moment every time she's onstage. The setup of her *Motomami* show is minimal, with most of the choreography taking place in front of a stark white backdrop. An onstage cameraman, a network of iPhones strategically placed around the stage, and even some of the dancers film different angles of the action, which are projected onto gigantic screens on either side of the stage. Cameras close in as Rosalía wipes off her makeup at one point; later they capture her as she cuts off a lock of her hair and throws it to the audience, literally giving a piece of herself. The result is visceral and uncanny, like realizing you're *in* a film with her rather than watching one.

Toward the end of the show, she's lying on her stomach, inching her way to the edge of the stage, the iPhones so eerily close that you can see the sweat dripping from her pores. "By that point in the show, I'm so messed up," she says, laughing. It's a declaration to the audience – an act of protest against the idea that female artists must present themselves in a specific way. The removal of her makeup, the lock of hair – they're meant to jar people, remind them that beyond just a performance, this is something real. "If someone throws something onstage, if someone screams, it means something's happening in that moment, and it's your choice to do something with it," she says. "You have to be able to let yourself go."

Sometimes, it gets a little too real. At an early stop on the tour, when she went to cut off one of her braided extensions, she accidentally cut off part of her real hair. She runs her fingers through her scalp, rearranging her hair and laughing at herself while she tries to show me the bluntly chopped strands. "I was a little worried about how I might end up by the end of the tour," she jokes. "But I'll keep improvising. I'll keep trying to make the show feel alive, even if it comes with a little consequence sometimes."

To her, concept is everything. Songs can't be disparate pieces; they must be part of a larger story. When she started *Motomami*, one of the first things that came to her was the name, a portmanteau inspired by motorcycle culture she'd grown up with in her small town of Sant Esteve Sesrovires, known for its car manufacturers and the Chupa Chups lollipop headquarters, on the outskirts of Barcelona. Her mother, who ran a metalworks company, rode motorcycles, and she wanted to convey the strength she'd learned from her and other women in her family, including her older sister Pili, now her stylist and creative director.

There was one thing she was after: "Absolute freedom," as she puts it. "As an artist, my biggest desire is to be as free as possible," she says. That's what *Motomami* was about. "It was, 'How far can I push to get as much freedom as possible in many ways, in subjects, in sound, in aesthetic, in everything?' "

She wanted to break out of the assumptions and expectations around her, and the constrictions of the broader pop machine that she's noticed firsthand.

"All around me, I'm constantly seeing this phenomenon I keep being surprised by, of women and their talent in these predetermined categories: the sexy one, the crazy one, the bossy one, the diva," she says. "But those categories don't lead anywhere, they're just limiting." She thinks of musical genres the same way: "I want to escape that categorization because it doesn't help you at all. It doesn't help your creativity. It's just something that restricts you, so it doesn't interest me."

Still, the freedom she sought wasn't easy, especially during one of the most confining periods in recent human history. When the pandemic hit, Rosalía stayed in the U.S., working from studios in New York, Los Angeles, and Miami, while her family remained in Spain, which was enforcing a strict lockdown. "It was one of the toughest times in my life," she says. "I wanted to go back home so bad, but I knew that if I went back, I'd be putting the project at risk. There was a high probability that I wouldn't finish it." So she kept grinding, leading a group of producers she admired, including Pharrell Williams, Goldstein, and Michael Uzowuru, and spent grueling hours fine-tuning every detail. Pili would call often, reminding her she kept pushing back release dates. "I would never hit my deadline," Rosalía admits. "But it's because I *know* when the music is finished."

Small miracles came along the way: Halfway through the process, Rosalía received a gigantic library of old-school reggaeton sounds from Luis Jonuel González Maldonado, the Puerto Rican producer known as Mr. NaisGai, one of Rauw's friends since elementary school and a close collaborator who worked on his platinum hit "Todo De Ti." "He explained that it had been passed from generation to generation, so I really felt that that was very special material," Rosalía says. "There was a before and after in the production after I was given that material. I could finally start to finish certain songs."

Pharrell watched her work from the beginning. "She thinks without limitation," he says, describing *Motomami's* through line as "songs with teeth," music that could bite you and leave a mark. "Watching her ups and her downs, her emotions, the way that she so brilliantly gave herself the therapy she needed with this album, it was equally cerebral as it was anthemic and energetic."

One of the songs he co-produced was "Hentai," where Rosalía chirps about the pleasures of good sex over a Disney-inspired piano melody, which Uzowuru encouraged her to play herself. She found the drums in Mr. NaisGai's library and built them into a climax, a double-entendre embedded into the track's core. "I whipped it until it got stiff/Second place is fucking you/First place is God," she sings, the album's most playful, perverse, and liberated moment. "I think there's too much taboo with certain subjects, and that taboos restrict your freedom," she says. "Feminine energy, there's an erotic superiority in femininity. Why not write from there? Why not make a song from that place, where you're owning your desires?"

Of course, the lyrics made people's heads explode, specifically after she posted a short snippet on TikTok last January. Its explicitness shocked people used to the solemn imagery from her previous albums. But "Hentai" is Rosalía evolving again, [*Cont. on 77*]

"I feel like on 'Motomami,' I did and said exactly what I wanted to say and do, on my own terms. After this, there's no turning back."

DRESS, STYLIST'S OWN. BOOTS BY **LEST SKELETON**.

KANYE'S DARK, TWISTED REALITY

Former Yeezy team members claim the rapper turned designer used porn, bullying, and 'mind games' to control his staff — and that Adidas execs 'turned their moral compass off'

BY MATT SULLIVAN & CHEYENNE ROUNDTREE

Working on
his collection
in California,
February 2020

KANYE'S DARK, TWISTED REALITY

HUSH FELL OVER the factory sample room in Qingyuan, China, as Kanye West examined the prototypes of his latest Yeezy sneakers on display before him. Decision-makers from Adidas and members of his entourage waited intently for his feedback when, according to two people who attended the August 2017 meeting, West began to yell that the Yeezys were not yet up to his standards – then approached a senior female employee. The attendees say West looked down at his foot, stared up at the woman, and told her, "I want you to make me a shoe I can fuck."

Adidas representatives – including a vice president involved in the apparel giant's billion-dollar licensing partnership with West's influential brand – did not confront West about his alleged remark, the two attendees claim. The woman took a leave of absence before she moved on to a job elsewhere at Adidas. (In an email, she declined to comment for this story.)

Former Yeezy and Adidas employees point to the alleged incident as one of many experiences – over the course of a decade – in which, they say, West used intimidation tactics with the staff of his fashion empire that were provocative, frequently sexualized, and often directed toward women.

Since Adidas severed ties with West in late October, amid a hail of hate speech, more than two dozen former Yeezy and Adidas staffers have described to ROLLING STONE an abusive office culture that left many of them fearing for their livelihoods. (One former employee claims they were fired for suggesting Drake's music be played in the Yeezy studio.) Behind the scenes, this celebrity boss did more than test the boundaries of professionalism: Former Yeezy and Adidas staffers and creative collaborators claim that he played pornography to Yeezy staff in meetings; discussed porn and showed an intimate photograph of Kim Kardashian in job interviews; and showed an explicit video and photos of Kardashian as well as his own sex tapes to Yeezy team members.

On Nov. 22, several former high-ranking employees for Yeezy sent a revelatory open letter – an advance copy of which was obtained exclusively by ROLLING STONE – to the executive board members and newly installed CEO of Adidas. In it, they insist that leaders from Adidas were aware of West's "problematic behavior" but "turned their moral compass off," raising questions about whether his corporate partner could have stepped in years ago.

"There was no accountability," says a person at the Qingyuan meeting. "Difficult moments happened, with executives in the room – VP level or higher – and nothing would be done."

The letter urged Adidas' CEO and executive board to address "the toxic and chaotic environment that Kanye West created" and "a very sick pattern of predacious behavior toward women" who worked with him as part of the Yeezy-Adidas partnership. As described in the letter, "He has, in years past, exploded at women in the room with offensive remarks, and would resort to sexually disturbing references when providing design feedback."

After an earlier version of this article was published online, Adidas launched an investigation into the allegations. "It is currently not clear whether the accusations made in an anonymous letter are true," said a representative. "However, we take these allegations very seriously." West, who recently stopped working with his publicist and was dropped as a client by his high-profile attorneys, could not be reached for comment through direct messages or intermediaries.

In public, West has referred to a "full-on pornography addiction" that "destroyed my family" and to sex as a design inspiration. Privately, former Yeezy and Adidas staffers regret accepting what they agreed was an unwritten rule from Adidas management – "Kanye is just Kanye" – and underestimating what they once viewed as relatively harmless comments. But the writers of the letter accuse the company of lacking "responsibility, accountability, and protection [and] that Adidas failed to provide their employees throughout what we experienced as years of verbal abuse, vulgar tirades, and bullying attacks."

"He would be in a meeting, and he'd rattle off in his laptop" to play a porn video, says one senior employee. "And he's like, 'I need this in the background to keep me focused.' And you'd be like, 'Uhhhh, oh-kay.' "

WEST TRANSPLANTED Yeezy from Nike to Adidas in late 2013. A few months later, he invited a rising creative, whom he'd met only once over the phone, to his home in the Hollywood Hills. The creative was excited about a potential collaboration and recalls West, within minutes of stepping into the living room, beckoning them to check out his laptop. "He showed me the video of Francesca Le, a buff porn star with a strap-on dildo fucking another girl in the ass," the former collaborator tells ROLLING STONE. "He's like, 'What do you think of it?' Not laughing at all." The former collaborator who visited West's home says they initially found the encounter amusing and recalls West appreciating their response that porn stars are entertainers, too. "At the time I found it odd but in line with his persona as an edgy artist," the former collaborator says. "Now, seeing it within a larger pattern, I feel it was a tactic to break a person down and establish their unwavering allegiance to him, testing and destroying people's boundaries. (In a statement to ROLLING STONE after publication of the article online, Le says it's "extremely concerning, disheartening, and disappointing that someone would use my work in a way that is demeaning to other human beings.")

In October, amid a public meltdown and the denouement of his deal with Adidas, West released a 30-minute documentary on YouTube. It included a scene of him showing a pornographic video to two Adidas executives on a phone, in front of two members of his inner circle. Moments later in the documentary, West alludes to having a history of antics like "playing the porn" and "screaming" as elements of his Adidas relationships: "We've done all this," he says. Shervin Pishevar, a venture capitalist who worked with West, chimes in to tell the executives, "What you're feeling right now is extreme discomfort, and that is exactly the point." Later that month, West bragged in a podcast that during his first-ever meeting with Adidas executives, he played an explicit video of a porn star dressed in a catsuit drinking milk from a bowl. The open letter sent to the Adidas board, which aims to speak for a collective of employees "who may be fearful of speaking up," claims that the YouTube documentary scene "is by no means a new intimidation approach" and that "Kanye's problematic behavior started within the first year of his partnership with the Adidas brand."

Pete Fox, who served as the president of Yeezy in 2016, remembers West bonding with the "misfits" and "art nerds" of Yeezy's startup days. "If he likes you and wants you on the team, he's super charming," Fox explains, adding: "If he didn't like you or if something happened, he'd fly off the handle and it'd be over." Asked about the allegations that West showed porn to Yeezy staff, Fox says, "I never looked at porn with him or anything like that, but we would look at things together that maybe would be surprising to people." He continues, "In high fashion, there's a lot of sexy, controversial things that maybe they reference or look at, as opposed to a company like Adidas, where you would never show any nudity in a mood board."

Fox was the only person who agreed to go on the record with his name for this article. Every other Yeezy and Adidas staffer and contractor – as well as the authors of the open letter – requested anonymity to speak candidly, citing Adidas company policy, possible legal action after signing nondisclosure agreements, and fear of public reprisal by West. None of the people interviewed for this article would say if they formally complained to Adidas management concerning West's behavior. But a dozen former Yeezy and Adidas staffers recalled an atmosphere in which West praised some employees while belittling staffers he'd publicly supported just weeks, if not moments, earlier – "playing mind games," one former staffer called it. After one disagreement, for example, West made a young female designer of color sit on the floor for a meeting that lasted hours, according to a former staffer in the room. "You don't deserve to sit at the table," the staffer recalled West saying.

This is entertainment investigations reporter CHEYENNE ROUNDTREE*'s first print feature for* ROLLING STONE. *Contributor* MATT SULLIVAN *wrote the October cover story on Stephen Curry.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: © PAOLO PELLEGRIN/MAGNUM PHOTO

YEEZY WALKS
Above: West attends the Vogue World event during New York Fashion Week in September. Right: West worked as a creative director for the Pornhub Awards in 2018, where a phalanx of adult-film stars paraded in sheer Yeezy wear.

WHEN THE OTHER SHOE DROPS
Left: West discusses his collection at the Fast Company Innovation Festival in 2019. A self-described porn addict, he allegedly told attendees at a factory showroom in China that Yeezy prototypes weren't up to par, allegedly telling one, "I want you to make me a shoe I can fuck."

"No wonder why he didn't want senior business managers in the room," the open letter alleges. "He wanted to continue to use his power to violate you in a quiet way and threaten your role and existence within the team." The letter goes further, alleging that a "disturbingly" sexualized atmosphere around women at Yeezy was indicative of a pattern in which West "bullies and intimidates to get what he wants": "The most troubling behavior that should have been flagged by the executive team very early in the partnership is his manipulative and fear-based approach to leading the team, all while trying to assert dominance over Adidas employees in closed rooms."

THE FIRST YEEZY collection launched in 2015 and included the debut of the Yeezy Boost 350 sneaker, a vision of knitwear and moon-ready footprints that became a global status symbol. Adidas expanded its deal with West in June 2016, empowering him to oversee an entire category of shoes, apparel, accessories, fragrances, and eventually even architecture. Executives from Adidas, which is based in Germany, spoke of him glowingly in public and encouraged Yeezy to staff up.

Inside Yeezy's brutalist, 14,390-square-foot office in Calabasas, California, West gathered with the designers who worked for his West Brands and the product team commuting from Adidas U.S. headquarters in Portland, Oregon. Two of West's confidants recall thriving in a culture that felt like there was "no middle management" getting in the way of creatives, while three former senior employees say West shirked Portland's operational support and oversight. "He wanted absolute control," says Fox, the former Yeezy president who helped negotiate the contract extension. "Steve Jobs or Elon Musk . . . they were responsible to shareholders; Kanye 100 percent owns his brands – he can do whatever he wants, and we're just there to serve at his pleasure."

A former senior employee claims they were warned by two Adidas executives about West's peculiar idiosyncrasies shortly after joining Yeezy. The employee remembers one Adidas vice president saying, "Hey, just so you know, there's gonna be this whole porn-reference thing," and a second executive saying, "It's gonna catch you off guard the first time. I think he *does* it to catch people off guard." (The vice president didn't respond to requests for comment. The second executive declined to comment.)

The senior employee says West did, indeed, catch Yeezy staff by surprise. "He would be in a meeting and he'd be talking to you, and he'd rattle off in his laptop" to play a porn video, the employee says. "And he's like, 'I know it's uncomfortable, but I kind of need this in the background to keep me focused.' And you'd be like, 'Uhhhhh, oh-*kay*.' " The former senior employee claims to have seen West play porn videos in meetings at least five times.

One afternoon in early 2018, according to a high-ranking employee in the room, West sat at a bench in the back of the open Calabasas workspace he called the White Box, for a job interview with a female candidate. The senior footwear designer was presenting a portfolio on her laptop across the table from West, recalls the employee, when West interrupted to give the designer similar advice to what the employee says West told the Yeezy staff on more than one occasion: "If you ever get stuck creatively, just watch porn for 10 minutes."

The woman paused, recalls the high-ranking employee, attempting to go on with her presentation, only for West to continue: "If you're gonna be part of Yeezy, we say crazy shit here. You gotta stick with it. We keep moving, and we keep creating."

Throughout the job interview, the high-ranking employee claims, West "was trying to vet [her] to see if she would call him out on it, or if she would be able to roll with it." The employee remembers West continuing: "We create products of passion. I *literally* want to fuck my shoes. That's how good they are." The candidate, who did not get the job, would neither confirm nor deny the high-ranking employee's account. But the employee also recalls West making similar statements to colleagues about a shoe into which West or a Yeezy consumer could ejaculate – "not a sex-toy sneaker but something that you were so into that you would wanna have an intimate relationship" – at least 10 separate times. "He'd be, like, '*literally* fuck.' He would be very clear on what that meant."

Word had spread around Yeezy and Adidas that West allegedly made another similar comment to the senior female employee in China, in front of Adidas brass, and five former staffers recalled no talk of an investigation or intervention from the company into that alleged incident. "The way it was handled so quietly, it was like something in the room had died, and nobody could talk about it," one of the former staffers says of the female employee's subsequent departure from Yeezy. "It was turning a blind eye."

The open letter claims that leaders from Adidas "continued to tolerate his difficult behavior" as the years went on. In a statement to ROLLING STONE, an Adidas spokesperson wrote: "Adidas does not tolerate hate speech and offensive behavior and therefore has terminated the Adidas-Yeezy partnership. We have been and continue to be actively engaged in conversations with our employees about the events that lead [sic] to our decision to end the partnership. They have our full support and as we're working through the details of the termination, we have been clear that we want to keep our employees' talent and skills within the organization."

A former staffer says the woman in the Qingyuan meeting "sat through a lot of shit, and she left because of the shit – a hundred percent." Still, the staffer recalls being shocked when, the year after the alleged China incident, they say, colleagues walked out of a meeting with West and immediately recounted an "awkward and uncomfortable" moment: "He had pulled up MILF porn and was like, 'See this feeling? This feeling that you get when you watch this? This is what I want people to feel when they put on our shoes.' "

[*Cont. on 78*]

FROM TOP: NINA WESTERVELT/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX; JENNIFER SWANN; BRAD BARKET/GETTY IMAGES

GAMING LEVELS UP

P.34

ILLUSTRATION BY INGA ZIEMELE

△ **SINCE THE FIRST** popular video game was released more than 50 years ago, they have often been brushed off as niche and nerdy — the arena of the basement dweller, the outcast, the arcade-addicted kid who didn't want to engage with the real world. But that's never really been true — and it's especially not now. Today, Zelda, Mario, and Sonic are household names. Epic world-building has become not just a career for game designers, but also a passion for countless creators. Hundreds of millions of people go to Twitch to watch others conquer bosses and reveal tricks, and hundreds of millions more talk about it on Discord. Viewership for *League of Legends* World Championships rivals that of the Super Bowl. At this point, it's estimated that there are 3 billion gamers on the planet. For decades, gaming was a subculture. Now, it's become the culture itself. That's why, over the next six pages, we're taking a closer look at every facet of the world of gaming: introducing you to the most creative players, spotlighting the new releases and Hollywood adaptations we can't wait to see, examining the fight to diversify the industry both onscreen and behind the scenes, and more. It's a salute to where gaming's been — and where it's headed next.

GG

Clickers from *The Last of Us*

WHEN TROLLS ATTACK

Gamers who've fought for diversity have faced, and overcome, a torrent of online abuse

By Elise Favis

FOR ASHLEY JOHNSON, the chance to be a voice actor in the post-apocalyptic video game *The Last of Us Part II* was both a risk and irresistible. It was her first gig as a video-game protagonist, as her character, Ellie, moved up from a supporting role. But *Part II* wasn't a paint-by-numbers sequel: It killed off a beloved character; it featured a lesbian lead on its cover; and it subverted the dynamic of the original, which followed a white man as he protected a young girl from danger. As Johnson awaited the game's release in June 2020, she knew it wouldn't be for everyone, but she was "shocked," she says, by what happened next.

A contingent of gamers, angered by a lesbian lead character and the game's progressive politics, not only protested *The Last of Us Part II*, they sought to punish the people who made it. Johnson, who is for the first time opening up about the abuse she endured, says her Twitter DMs were flooded with threats of violence, including a user telling her he'd "rape her straight." They doctored images to make it look like she'd posted vulgar content online. And they superimposed her face and those of others who'd worked on the game onto images of characters being sexually violated or even beaten to death with a golf club.

"Some of the shit I was reading, I was like, 'I cannot believe someone sat behind their computer and put their fingers on the keyboard, and that's what they chose to write,'" Johnson says. "This hatred and anger, and being on the other end of that, for something I cared so deeply about, was hard."

Johnson's co-workers faced similar abuse. Studio president Neil Druckmann, who is Jewish, was hit with a wave of antisemitism and threats to his safety on social media. The most horrific abuse, Johnson says, was directed at Laura Bailey, her co-star and the voice of

IMAGE IN COMPOSITE BY SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

another lead character, Abby Anderson. Users were upset that Abby, a woman in a world full of human-eating monsters, has a muscular physique, and turned her character into a transphobic meme.

The Last of Us Part II saga is not surprising, sadly. For more than a decade, as women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community have fought for representation in the space, they've been met with backlash from a group of gamers, mostly men, who prefer it remain exclusive. The conflict hit its apex with 2014's Gamergate, a mass harassment campaign against female video-game critics and developers.

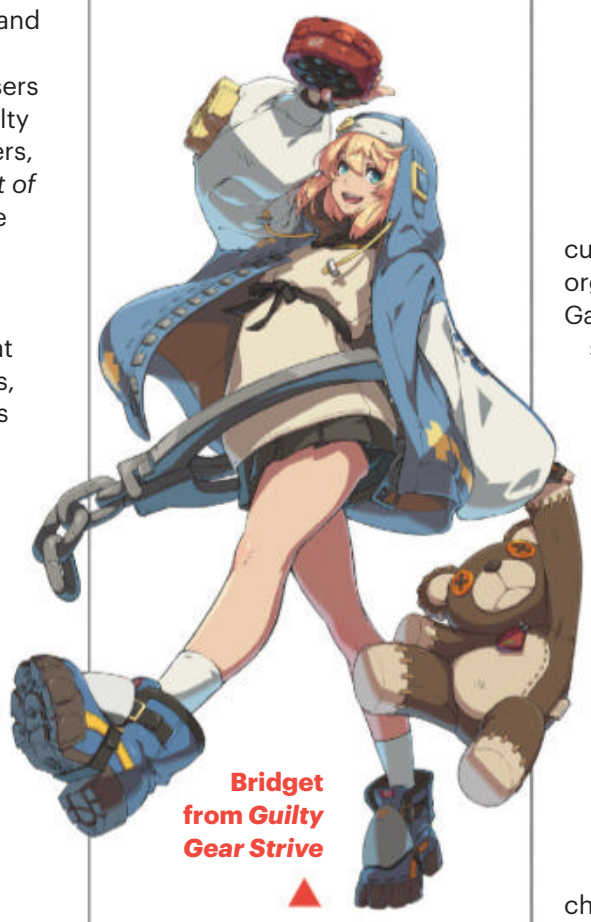
Today, it's clear the abusers have failed. For all the cruelty they unleashed on its makers, they couldn't keep *The Last of Us Part II* down — the game was a massive commercial success and won Game of the Year at the 2020 Game Awards, as well as honors at the Golden Joystick Awards, the British Academy Games Awards, and more. And while members of marginalized communities continue to face abuse online, it hasn't stopped them from making the gaming world — its developers, characters, executives, and audience — more diverse than ever.

If many men today act like video games belong to them and them alone, it's because they grew up with a video-game industry that told them exactly that. "Hit Her Game Spot," reads a 2004 headline in *Electronic Gaming Monthly* for a piece about how to manipulate "your girlfriend" into playing video games. The article includes six strategies and a backup: "If all fails and she refuses to touch your joypad, the least you can do is feed her some lines the next time you're geeking out with your gaming pals."

The article is typical of an era when near-naked women were the norm in video-game advertising, and Kotaku managing editor Carolyn Petit, a video-game critic for more than a decade, says that bygone messaging is still driving harassment. "Everything in the gaming space sent a message very intentionally to young straight men that games are for you," Petit says, "and they're here to fulfill your every power fantasy."

But a decade ago, the industry started to realize it was losing out by pushing away more than half of humanity. More games featured prominent female characters, and offscreen, female critics were gaining prominence as they pointed out sexism in popular games and gaming culture.

Then came Gamergate, when what began as an unfounded attack on a female video-game developer metastasized into an all-out assault on female writers and developers. After an initial explosion of attention, Gamergate left the headlines, but for women,



Bridget from *Guilty Gear Strive*

people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals in gaming, the harassment never went away.

When Mattias Lehman, a Black man and former employee of Riot Games, appeared on the company's Twitch channel in 2017, viewers fixated on his race and referred to him as the "Black" version of another commentator. The first time he appeared on his own stream, a viewer immediately called him the n-word. After a few months, Lehman quit appearing on Riot's stream. By 2018, he'd left the industry entirely, and now works on climate-change advocacy. "To me," Lehman says, "the community feels like it includes a lot of people who just felt salty that they never got to be bullies and jocks in high school and wanted a community where they get to do that."

For many developers, external abuse is compounded by cultures of sexism inside their organizations. In 2018, Riot Games — maker of the massively popular arena-battle game *League of Legends* — paid $100 million to settle a class-action gender-discrimination lawsuit after a Kotaku exposé of a company steeped in "bro culture." Female employees reported seeing their ideas ignored and careers impeded while senior leaders allegedly passed around lists of women they wanted to sleep with.

Riot says it has instituted changes, including shuffling its all-male leadership to one that is 25 percent female. And video-game firms have made forays into proactively protecting employees against online harassment.

But developers have mostly looked to one another for support. Feminist Frequency, which produces commentary on pop culture and games, runs a text hotline for people who have faced harassment. Anita Sarkeesian, a critic who was severely harassed during Gamergate and is the hotline's executive director, says there were "very few resources to help" and "very few people who understood" what she and others experienced. "We saw that these sorts of online attacks and abuses were not a thing of the past," she says. "So, we started creating the resources we wish we had."

They're also creating the games they wish they had. Chandana Ekanayake has been in the video-game industry for a quarter-century, but five years ago, he left to cofound his own indie developer, Outerloop Games.

Outerloop is minority-led, and the company's first game was *Falcon Age,* a sci-fi virtual-reality title about a young woman attempting to save a dying planet colonized by automated, mechanical invaders reminiscent of British imperials. Outerloop's next title, *Thirsty Suitors,* is played from the perspective of a teenage bisexual girl named Jala, who is half Sri Lankan and half Indian, with immigrant parents.

In other words, Outerloop puts out games made by people of color, featuring people of color, with an intended audience of anyone who is interested. It's everything Gamergate tried to stop but couldn't.

Petit, the Kotaku gaming critic, sees reasons for hope in her peers' resilience. "We should take motivation, take encouragement from the sense that change is possible," she says. "And that queer gamers, trans gamers, women, and people of color — whoever we are — we're not going anywhere, because games belong to us, too."

Ellie and her partner, Dina, in *The Last of Us Part II*

K'Sante from *League of Legends*

FROM TOP: SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT; ARC SYSTEM WORKS; RIOT GAMES

A LIFELONG 'QUEST'

Ashly Burch plays a game tester on the Apple TV+ comedy 'Mythic Quest' — but she's also one of the gaming world's most beloved voice actors

Mythic Quest's "resident nerd," Burch

TO NON-gamers, the most famous person on *Mythic Quest,* a workplace comedy set at a gaming company, is probably its creator and star, Rob McElhenney. But to gamers, it's Ashly Burch. While her role as Rachel on the sitcom, where she's also a writer, is a supporting one, in the gaming industry, Burch is a bona fide star. For years, she's voiced Aloy in the hugely popular *Horizon* series, whose latest iteration, *Horizon: Forbidden West,* has made several Best of 2022 lists. Her career is a culmination of a long-standing passion for gaming, one that's paying off as the industry goes mainstream.

When you got the gig on *Mythic Quest,* were you able to draw on your background in the gaming industry?
Yeah. My experience in the writers room was [as] the resident nerd. I never thought being an indoor kid was going to benefit me to the extent that it has, but there was a lot of experience I was able to bring.

You broke out with a YouTube show, *Hey Ash, Whatcha Playin',* where you played games and offered commentary. Does that help you connect with Rachel?
I think there's an authenticity people can feel. The testers are closest to the game. So having that affection for games in general [is beneficial]. I never had to worry about, like, "How do I hold the controller? How do I move the character?"

You've also voiced Tiny Tina in *Borderlands* and Mel in *The Last of Us Part II*. Do you feel attached to them?
It's impossible not to get attached. At least for me, you have to put some of yourself in the character. It's not like a Horcrux [an object in *Harry Potter* that contains a piece of one's soul] — you're not putting it there and never getting it back. But you assign certain things about yourself to that person. It's very bizarre psychologically.

Do you find that fans feel some ownership over the characters, too?
It is inevitably a communal experience. I remember talking to Rob about when *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* [which McElhenney also co-created] came out. And there's just this thing — it's yours until it isn't. You're creating this for an audience.

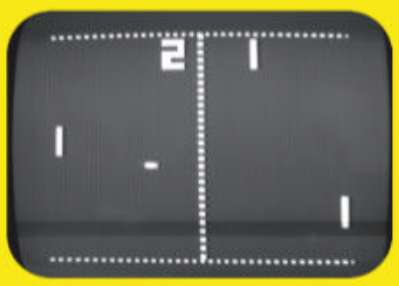
Over your time in the industry, what do you feel have been the biggest positive shifts in gaming culture?
Absolutely that there have been more women and people of color in games, and making games. When I started recording *Horizon,* there was not a huge breadth of female protagonists. And now we have so many franchises that are headed by women, by people of color. I think more can be done to improve that, but the first female game character I can remember relating to was Meryl in *Metal Gear Solid,* and she still spends 80 percent of the game being damseled or possessed or kidnapped. To have characters like Aloy or Ellie or Abby [of *The Last of Us*], all of these women that are heading these games that are messy, complex, strong, strange, and interesting — it means a lot to me. And it makes me really happy that women that are coming up now get to have those experiences with those characters.

How do you feel about general audiences embracing gaming now?
I love it. That whole debate that went on for so long of "Are games art?" I'm like, "Obviously, yes." And telling people that I voice-act, and they go, "Like Mario? Like, 'It's-a-me?'" So it's a nice thing that finally people are like, "Oh, these are good. They're kind of like movies." Yeah, they've been good for a long time. They've been important for a long time. So it makes me happy. **CHRISTOPHER CRUZ**

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: STORM SANTOS; LUKAS BARTH/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES; AP IMAGES; PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES; MARK LENNIHAN/AP IMAGES

GAMING'S MUSIC MILESTONES

Bands, singers, and sound designers have shaped the experience since the beginning



1972 | *Pong*, created as a computer-engineering experiment, introduces audio to video games.

1978 | *Space Invaders* is the first to have a full soundtrack — a four-tone dynamic tune that hooks players.

1982 | *Journey Escape,* launched along with the album *Escape,* sees Journey dodging "loved-crazed groupies."

1989 | *Tetris* is released on Game Boy with its hypnotic theme song, a play off an 1861 Russian poem.

HOLLYWOOD'S NEW POWER PLAYERS

It seems impossible, but one day, Tinseltown is going to run out of Marvel and DC Comics IP to mine. Luckily, video games are here to save the day. Everyone from Netflix to Universal is planning arcade adaptations for 2023

The Last of Us

STAR POWER Pedro Pascal, Bella Ramsey, Gabriel Luna, Anna Torv, Nick Offerman

HYPE LEVEL ♥♥♥♥♥

LORE Written and produced by *Chernobyl*'s Craig Mazin — with involvement from game co-creator and steward Neil Druckmann, and starring our favorite Mandalorian — this mutant-outbreak survival saga, premiering on HBO in January, is shaping up to be the most prestigious video-game adaptation of all time.

The Super Mario Bros. Movie

STAR POWER Chris Pratt, Charlie Day, Anya Taylor-Joy, Jack Black, Keegan-Michael Key

HYPE LEVEL ♥♥♥♥

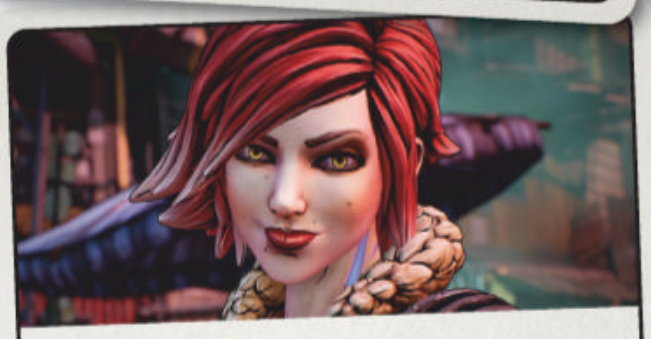
LORE With a star-studded cast, Nintendo's second attempt at *Mario Bros.* — an animated production coming from Universal Studios this March — at the very least looks like a triple-jump ahead of the initial Goomba-stomping 1993 live-action version.

Fallout

STAR POWER Walton Goggins, Ella Purnell, Kyle MacLachlan

HYPE LEVEL ♥♥♥♥

LORE Known for its satirical take on a retro-futuristic apocalyptic world, *Fallout* should be fertile ground for this Amazon Prime adaptation by *Westworld* creators Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan. Following nuclear-bomb survivors emerging into a wasteland, there's certain to be some gonzo humor.



Borderlands

STAR POWER Kevin Hart, Cate Blanchett, Jack Black, Jamie Lee Curtis, Édgar Ramirez

HYPE LEVEL ♥♥

LORE A wild-card cast and commitment to the game's cartoonish aesthetic may be enough to elevate this Lionsgate action flick from director Eli Roth, but the challenge for the horror auteur will be whether he can manage to make the manic, juvenile humor of the series palatable for a wide audience.

Twisted Metal

STAR POWER Anthony Mackie, Neve Campbell, Thomas Haden Church, Will Arnett

HYPE LEVEL ♥♥♥

LORE A boldly left-field choice from Peacock, this half-hour action comedy from *Deadpool* scribes Rhett Reese and Paul Wernick has fans hoping the show can revive interest in one of gaming's most tragically latent properties. Bonus: Will Arnett voicing serial-killer hell clown Sweet Tooth.

Gran Turismo

STAR POWER Archie Madekwe, David Harbour, Orlando Bloom, Djimon Hounsou

HYPE LEVEL ♥♥♥

LORE In a meta twist, the events of Sony's Neill Blomkamp racing flick blend player fantasy and real life. Rather than the game itself — which doesn't have a plot— it's based on the true story of Jann Mardenborough, a *Gran Turismo* player who made the game his reality by becoming a professional driver.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: SHANE HARVEY/HBO; © 2022 NINTENDO AND UNIVERSAL STUDIOS; BETHESDA SOFTWORKS; 2K GAMES; SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT, 2; © DIC ENTERPRISES/EVERETT COLLECTION; RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES; © NEW LINE CINEMA/EVERETT COLLECTION; © UNIVERSAL PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; DAVID MCNEW/GETTY IMAGES

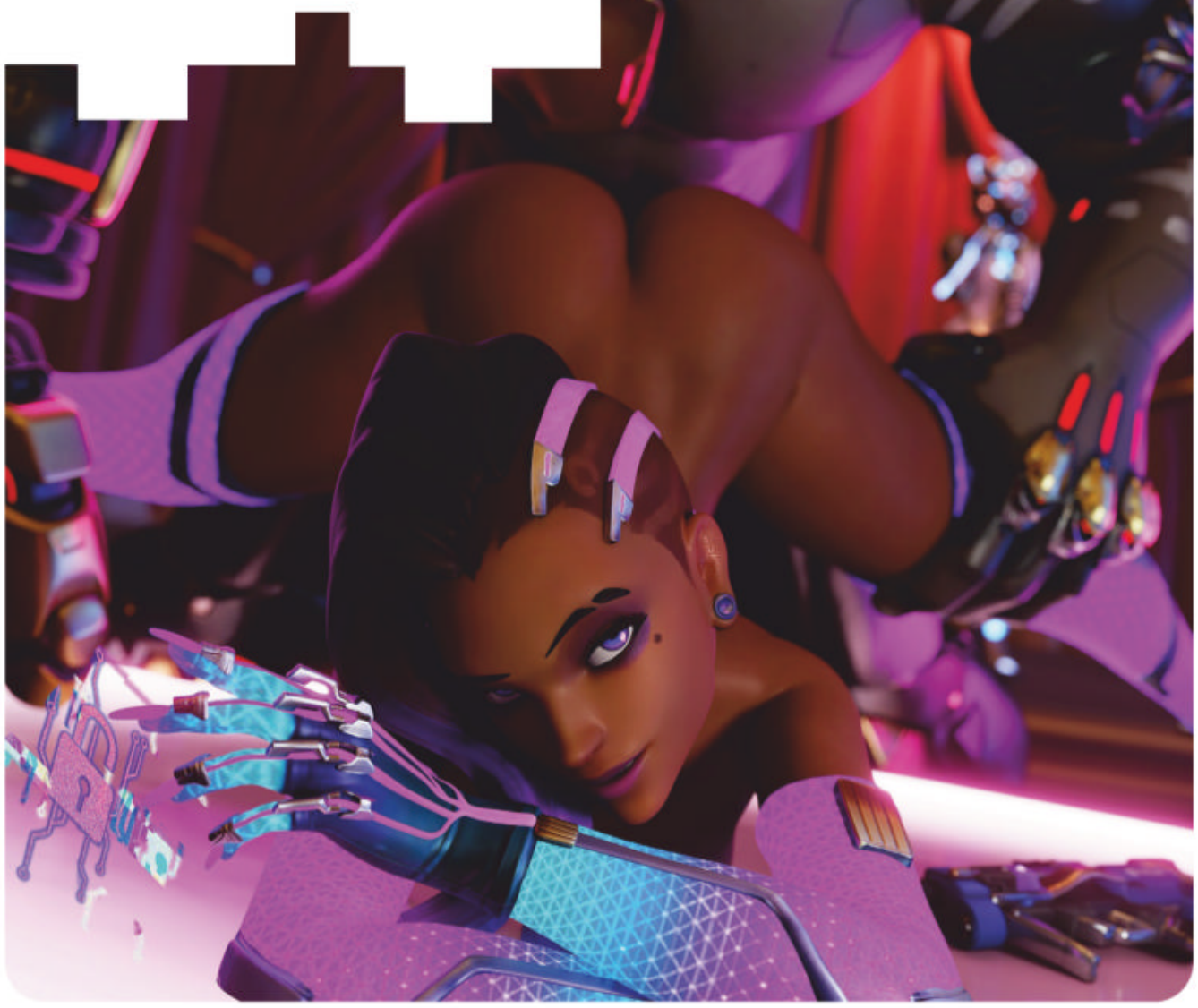
1989 | Wrestling figure Lou Albano brings "The Mario Rap" to the *Super Mario Bros. Super Show!* cartoon program.

1994 | Michael Jackson is hired to help score *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* — but exits after scandals surface.

1994 | Techno band the Immortals release *Mortal Kombat: The Album* in conjunction with the game.

1995 | Kylie Minogue appears as playable fighter Cammy in *Street Fighter: The Movie* (the arcade game).

1998 | *Dance Dance Revolution* has players dancing to golden oldies like "That's the Way (I Like It)" in local arcades.



THE 'OVERWATCH' PORN TAKEOVER

Animators have turned a popular game into a surprisingly inclusive mode of sexual expression

LAST JUNE, *Overwatch,* a well-known multiplayer shooter from Blizzard Entertainment, tweeted that the long-awaited sequel was coming, receiving around 70,000 likes. Four days after *Overwatch 2* came out in October, a porn-animation artist called Memz revealed that they had obtained the updated character models. That tweet received nearly 100,000 likes. This was, it seemed, a bigger deal than the game — it meant *Overwatch* porn, an already thriving genre, was about to get a whole new reboot.

Fan porn is an established fact of the gaming industry, with XXX tube sites awash in *Fortnite* filth, *Second Life* sex, and *Resident Evil* orgies — animated versions of favorite characters going at it in every way imaginable. But *Overwatch* has, since its 2016 release, seen its characters most frequently borrowed. There are more than 70,000 *Overwatch* illustrations on erotica website Rule 34; it consistently ranks among the most common Pornhub searches (once even beating "anal"); and r/Overwatch_Porn has 693,000 subscribers. While *Overwatch 2* itself garnered mixed reviews, production of this content — representing a global and diverse range of sexual perspectives — hasn't slowed for a second.

A European animator in their twenties, preferring to remain anonymous, offers one possible reason: Previously, the software for rendering bootleg video-game porn was "crappy," they explain, and there weren't many decent models to work with. Then came Blender — free, open-source, high-powered 3D-animation software that upped outsiders' work to industry standards. It just so happened that the women of *Overwatch* were the first good models available. "Pixar quality, really," the animator says. "Easily recognizable and unabashedly sexy."

The character Sombra is often in *Overwatch* porn.

If Blizzard has an official policy on the porn, it's never been made public: Requests for comment to them and more than a dozen people who have worked on *Overwatch* went unanswered except for a single former animator declining to comment. Just days after the game's 2016 launch, Blizzard issued a handful of copyright takedowns on videos using models ripped from the game's beta version. But since that initial, halfhearted crackdown, the porn purveyors have run wild.

Andres Guadamuz, a reader on intellectual property law at the University of Sussex, says U.S. companies are "faced with some choices on how much they should pursue adult-themed fan art." A few, like Disney, will be more aggressive in order to protect their family-friendly reputation. Blizzard, however, may find most litigation isn't worthwhile. "My guess is that they must be playing the numbers," he says. "*Overwatch* is still a reasonably popular game, and anything that will antagonize their community would be negative."

Karina, 29, used to make some "very simple poses" of Lara Croft, the sex-object protagonist of *Tomb Raider,* with primitive fan-designed software from 2009. That was a "silly hobby," she says, but years later, she "discovered Blender and got sucked into it, learning about materials, shaders, lighting, camerawork, and other stuff." Now, with 20,000 Twitter followers and a Patreon, she charges $150-plus for an *Overwatch* porn scene. "I get quite a lot of *Overwatch* commissions," she says.

"Human beings are inherently turned on by novelty," says Dr. Justin Lehmiller, a research fellow at the Kinsey Institute. "Some people have these sexual fantasies about impossible scenarios — animated porn is a way of vicariously living out these kind of fantasies."

The digital "actors" in these scenarios can do and be anything, of any sexual orientation, with any combination of physical traits. That's a potential upside, Lehmiller thinks, for transgender and nonbinary people usually seen through a "fetishized lens" in mainstream porn, or anyone plagued by insecurity when looking at the body types traditionally showcased there.

But all of this leaves us to ponder the enduring appeal of naked *Overwatch* characters. Solomon, a 20-year-old who moderates the *Overwatch* porn subreddit, says that computer-generated porn is "simply ethically better" because it's made without "abuse or coercion." Perhaps Blizzard, between its meticulous art and massive footprint, accidentally engineered the pinnacle of the form. At this point, the thirst for *Overwatch* is self-sustaining, even devotional. So says EvilAudio, 28, a voice-over artist in Brazil who has supplied the sound effects for hundreds of these videos: "It's a religion, I guess." **MILES KLEE**

FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: NAIFU_NSFW; EVAN AGOSTINI/GETTY IMAGES; NO CREDIT; BOB BERG/GETTY IMAGES; CLAYTON CALL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; BRITTA PEDERSEN/DPA/PICTURE ALLIANCE/GETTY IMAGES

GAMING'S MUSIC MILESTONES

1999 | *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* introduces a new generation to punk, from the Dead Kennedys to Suicidal Tendencies.

2001 | *Grand Theft Auto III* creates fully functioning radio stations — one more thing to distract you as you drive.

2003 | *Def Jam Vendetta* dreams of a world where Ghostface Killah can suplex Ludacris in the squared circle.

2005 | *Guitar Hero* launches with its unique controller, bringing Stevie Ray Vaughn to dorm rooms everywhere.

2009 | *Just Dance* turns Cyndi Lauper, Blondie, and Deee-Lite into a Wii-mote-waggling choreography-exercise boom.

Leon from *Resident Evil 4*

PRESS START TO PLAY

2023's most anticipated video-game titles

LAST YEAR SAW A SLEW of massive games, from blockbuster sequels like *God of War: Ragnarök* to delightful indies like *Tunic* and Game of the Year contenders like *Elden Ring*. Here, five titles we can't wait to see in 2023.

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom SWITCH

A rare direct sequel for *Zelda,* this follow-up to 2017's *Breath of the Wild* takes to the open skies after a mysterious cataclysm upends the world of Hyrule. Plot details are mum, but reinventing the legend is Nintendo's forte.

Resident Evil 4 PC, PLAYSTATION, XBOX

After multiple rereleases, you'd think fans would be sick of *RE4,* but Capcom has reanimated the influential title, like an unkillable zombie, once more. With rebuilt mechanics and a visual overhaul, this horror remake looks to be more fearsome than ever.

Hollow Knight: Silksong

PC, MAC, LINUX, SWITCH, PLAYSTATION, XBOX

When it came out in 2017, *Hollow Knight* had one of the most visually lush 2D worlds we can remember. This sequel — an indie title with AAA clout — is primed to bring fans back to the Hallownest.

Marvel's Spider-Man 2 PLAYSTATION

Insomniac's Spider-Man series has been a blueprint for heartfelt storytelling and stellar action. This supersized sequel puts players as both Peter Parker and Miles Morales in the battle against fan-favorite villain Venom.

Starfield PC, XBOX

Developed by Bethesda, the leader in open-world RPGs, this original game brings its brand of first-person exploration to the cosmos. Alongside robust character creation and nonlinear gameplay, the space epic will boast more than 1,000 planets to explore, emphasizing a colossal number of player choices.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: CAPCOM; COURTESY OF THE PLAYERS; RIOT GAMES/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES; EPIC GAMES; JOSH EDELSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID BECKER/GETTY IMAGES

THE GAME BREAKERS

By exploiting quirks and glitches, some highly advanced players have finished the biggest games in record time

How fast can a game be beaten — and how many tricks can a player use as they do it? With "game breaking," users look for loopholes in a game's design and use them to get past difficult enemies. Different players have different approaches: Speedrunners, for example, find the fastest way to finish, while "map clippers" twist "mechanics" — the rules by which the digital universe is bound — to see what they can get away with before it becomes a problem for developers, or crashes the game completely.

AntVenom

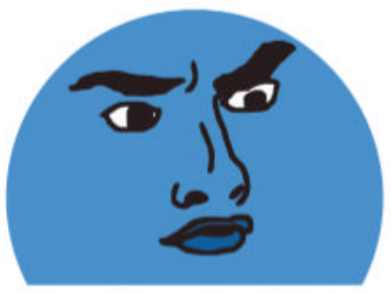
MINECRAFT

AntVenom is a *Minecraft* creator who became a sensation by testing the limits of the hugely popular sandbox game and posting tutorials on his YouTube channel. He got into *Minecraft* in 2011 when he visited the Far Lands, a bug within older versions of *Minecraft,* in which old terrain basically begins to break down, creating new worlds for players to explore. "*Minecraft* isn't a game like other [high-budget] games," he says, describing it as "kind of like LEGOs," in that the gameplay is entirely up to the user." As the game has developed over time, it's very much catered to the mindset of breaking *Minecraft*."

Player 5

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

Speedrunner Player 5 focuses on *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* — in fact, he currently holds a world record for completing the game in just under 24 minutes. He says his favorite aspect of speedrunning is having a clear goal and constantly working to improve it. "Essentially, I think it's pretty comforting, being able to be so familiar with something that your muscle memory takes over," he says. "I know what I'm doing. And then once you get your personal best after thousands of attempts, it makes it all worth it."



Niftski

SUPER MARIO BROS.

Super Mario Bros. speedrunner Niftski — who holds the world record for the fastest completion time, at just under four minutes and 54 seconds — has been playing the Nintendo title since he was about six. But since 2019, it's become one of his favorite pastimes. "Playing casually can get boring," he says. "It gives it a new feel."

Niftski uses what are called "real-time attack runs" to go frame by frame through the game. "What I do is I clip the blocks" — essentially, go through walls — which "pushes Mario more to the right, compared to where the camera scroll is." That can trick the game into sending him way ahead, in no time at all.

Mitchriz

ELDEN RING

Speedrunner Mitchriz got his start on *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* in 2019 (which he beat in two hours, *blindfolded*) before trying his hand at *Elden Ring,* one of 2022's hottest games. While it can take players more than 50 hours to complete the game, he finished in nine minutes and 40 seconds.

In *Elden Ring,* Mitchriz uses a technique called zipping, which allows him to fly instantly across the game's vast world. "It's a weird interaction with some of the animations in the game, where if you [move] the animations in a particular way, you basically just get launched several hundred feet forward," he says. "That lets you skip bosses to get towards the end of the game. It's a really powerful glitch." **GEORGE YANG**

2014 | Imagine Dragons write the *League of Legends* theme "Warriors," and perform it at the game's World Championship.

2014 | Paul McCartney contributes to the *Destiny* soundtrack with single "Hope for the Future."

2020 | Travis Scott legitimizes metaverse concerts with a *Fortnite* performance, a place he perhaps should have stayed.

2022 | Superstar Lil Nas X is named "President" of *League of Legends,* where he launches a song and a "champion skin."

2022 | The Recording Academy announces a Grammy Award category for Best Score Soundtrack for Video Games.

THE SEARCH FOR A LOST GN'R MASTER-PIECE

How a group of hopelessly devoted Guns N' Roses fans leaked 19 CDs of outtakes from one of the most notorious albums in history – with major consequences for one of them *By* **David Peisner**

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHELLE THOMPSON

GUNS N' ROSES
self storage
800-800
CUBESMART
1st
1st

IN THE PARKING LOT OF A PANERA, just off I-95 in Stafford, Virginia, Rick Dunsford climbed into the passenger seat of a white Ford F-350 pickup. Depending whose account you believe, he was holding either $12,000 or $15,000 in cash. It was late afternoon on a Friday in July 2019. Dunsford had been driving through the night, making stops along the way – in Charlotte, North Carolina, to pick up an associate, Madeline Rose; at his sister's house in Virginia, to collect some of the money; and at a couple of different Wells-Fargo locations to get the rest of it. Madeline was in the back seat of the F-350. In the driver's seat was Robert Bird, who'd brought what they'd come for. * Before Bird handed it over, he offered them a taste. He slipped a CD-R into the stereo, and out it came through the speakers: a spacey synth line, then a big guitar riff and a crash of drums, and finally, the unmistakable howl of Axl Rose.

The song, "Atlas Shrugged," was recorded as part of the sprawling, chaotic sessions that would eventually birth Guns N' Roses' 2008 album, *Chinese Democracy*, but hadn't made the final track list. It had never been played live or appeared on any of the bootlegs that zipped around the Guns N' Roses fan community. For years, within that community, on message boards, Discord servers, and podcasts, "Atlas Shrugged" was a legend, a ghost, more rumor than fact. Some called it a lost masterpiece. Some doubted it even existed. Now, in just a few moments, Dunsford would have not only "Atlas Shrugged," but a thumb drive that held 19 CDs' worth of previously unreleased GN'R tracks.

As he sat in the truck listening, he choked back tears. "I was so happy," he says. "I don't think anything will top that feeling. I spent 20 years looking for this, so much time on these message boards, so much work, and I finally fucking found it."

That joy faded quickly. The full complement of 124 tracks started leaking on the internet within a month. Dunsford would eventually be blamed for the leaks by GN'R's management and legal teams, threatened with lawsuits, and banned from any future Guns N' Roses shows. He was forced to file for bankruptcy and, he says, was forcibly dragged from a venue by GN'R security. He also became a target of scorn and violent threats from other die-hard fans of the band.

For Dunsford, there could not have been a much worse fate. He grew up an outcast in Mississippi, the target of ridicule, bullying, and at times, outright violence because he had long hair and a taste for hard rock. Guns N' Roses saved him, and he became a hopelessly devoted fan. He even named his only son Axl. "It makes me angry the way things went because I know, deep down, I didn't leak that music," Dunsford said last February. "I was just an easy scapegoat."

The story of how these 19 CD-Rs made their way onto the internet is a long and winding tale, with a cast of characters at least as interesting as the one Axl Rose assembled to record them. Among others, there's Madeline Rose, a divisive figure among GN'R fans, who at various times has falsely claimed to other fans to work on behalf of the band's management company to remove fan-generated content from the internet. There's Jared St. Laurent, a.k.a. Mister Saint Laurent, or just "MSL," a bombastic ex-professional wrestler whose great-grandfather was the prime minister of Canada. There's Tom Zutaut, a legendary A&R executive responsible for signing both GN'R and Mötley Crüe – Pete Davidson played him in Netflix's *The Dirt* – who currently works as a car salesman in North Georgia.

Dunsford is so devoted a GN'R fan that he named his only son Axl. "When I tell people this story," he says, "they look at me like, 'You expect me to believe this?'"

And then there's a parade of GN'R superfans who seem only too eager to employ all manner of treachery, backstabbing, and deceit to get their hands on music deemed not good enough for an album widely dismissed as one of the biggest flops in rock history.

At the heart of the story is a parable about how fandom has changed in a digital age. The easy availability of millions upon millions of songs to anyone remotely curious to hear them – via subscription services, YouTube, SoundCloud, and whatnot – has made the scarce and the unattainable even more valuable. All the while, fan communities have become hothouse bubbles, susceptible to the same primal forces that radicalize all sorts of people online. It's easy to see how perspective can get lost.

As Dunsford put it, "When I tell people this story, they look at me like, 'You expect me to believe this?'"

IN THE ANNALS of rock history, *Chinese Democracy* is a punchline and a cautionary tale. Guns N' Roses spent more than 14 years working on it. At the beginning of the process, they were still arguably the biggest rock band in the world. By the end, they were Axl Rose fronting a collection of musicians who could've staffed a rock & roll fantasy camp.

Much of the band's core when they began making the album – Slash, Duff McKagan, Matt Sorum, Gilby Clarke – either quit or were fired (or both) along the way. New members reportedly had to be approved by Rose's spiritual adviser, an aura-reading psychic from Sedona named Sharon Maynard, who was often referred to as "Yoda." At various points, the band's lineup included ex-members of Nine Inch Nails, Primus, the Replacements, Devo, and the Psychedelic Furs. The list of musicians who auditioned, contributed, or visited the sessions includes Dave Navarro, Brian May, Sebastian Bach, Moby, and Shaquille O'Neal.

You could write an entire book about the tenure of avant-garde guitarist Buckethead, who communicated with bandmates through a hand puppet, and for whom a chicken coop was constructed in the studio, where, according to Zutaut, the guitarist would record his parts and watch porn. Zutaut also once claimed that, after Rose's wolf puppy took a shit in said chicken coop, Buckethead resisted efforts to clean it up, claiming he loved the smell.

The entire project wasn't only time consuming, it was wildly expensive, with costs reportedly running to a quarter of a million dollars per month at some stages, and a final tab of at least $13 million. The protracted recording process was a function of, among other things, Rose's desperate effort to match the sound coming out of the speakers to the sound in his head. A less charitable reading was that he'd simply lost the plot, and without a strong creative counterweight – someone like Slash or Duff who was equally invested in the outcome – there was nobody to help him find it.

As the process dragged on, managers, label executives, producers, and friends were enlisted to help get Rose to finish the album. The band's label, Interscope, would tease release dates only to scuttle them later. Even corporate America seemed to be trolling the band: In early 2008, Dr Pepper announced that if GN'R released the album that year, the soft-drink

DAVID PEISNER *profiled Ugandan musician and politician Bobi Wine in March 2020.*

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE
From left: Axl Rose in 2002; guitarist Buckethead, who was said to have recorded his parts and watched porn in a chicken coop constructed in the studio while making *Chinese Democracy*; Dunsford in May.

maker would give a free Dr Pepper to every person in America.

Dr Pepper had to make good on its offer. On Nov. 23, the album was finally released, although only via Best Buy, which reportedly paid $14 million to be the project's exclusive retailer. But after debuting at Number Three on the *Billboard* 200, sales cratered. Reviews were middling. *Chinese Democracy* went down as an epic failure. The fact that Slash and Duff eventually returned to the GN'R fold in 2016 has only served to make the album seem like even more of a bizarro relic from some alternate rock & roll universe.

Within the insular confines of the GN'R fan community, though, there were devotees like Dunsford and Madeline, for whom *Chinese Democracy* wasn't an embarrassing bomb from a megalomaniac who'd alienated his most important collaborators. It was an overlooked magnum opus by a misunderstood genius. If GN'R's early albums bottled a certain amount of anti-social rebellion, *Chinese Democracy* represents a kind of counterrevolution, in which its relative unpopularity has only intensified the passion of its adherents.

Madeline told me that for years on GN'R forums, "85 to 95 percent of fans wanted nothing to do with Guns N' Roses unless it was discussing the old lineup. Then you have people like me – we call ourselves five-percenters. All we cared about was *Chinese Democracy*."

I MET DUNSFORD in February, outside his house in Blue Mountain, a speck of a town planted amid wide swaths of farmland in northern Mississippi. He's a wiry guy with a reddish beard and the affable, excited demeanor of a new puppy. He was wearing a white T-shirt emblazoned with the figure of *Chinese Democracy*-era GN'R bassist Tommy Stinson, dark jeans, and a black ski hat. Sitting inside an unfinished building on his property, he rolled up his left sleeve to show me his "Guns N' Roses arm." He pointed to a tattoo extending down from his shoulder: a dragon with Chinese lettering and the GN'R logo.

"I got this the day *Chinese Democracy* was released," he says. "Then I got lyrics for the song 'Better' right there," he says pointing to a line on his bicep that reads, "The melody inside of me still searches for solution." He rotated his arm. "I got Axl's signature right here. Slash ended up signing it in 2016, then Duff did as well."

Dunsford speaks in an often-breathless Southern drawl. Words stumble out in a rush, each eager to overtake the one before it. As with other aspects of his life, his excitement can get the best of him. As Kevin Belasco, a friend of his from the GN'R community, says, "Rick's a good guy, but he's a little over the top. It reflects some unmet need in his life."

Dunsford, 36, is married, has three kids, and works in distribution for a big-box retailer. He grew up about 40 minutes down the road in Tupelo, a small city best known as Elvis Presley's birthplace. From a young age, his two favorite bands were GN'R and Kiss. "It was hard growing up around here because this is the Bible Belt and the music I was into was considered devil-worshipping music." In 1996, just before he was to go to a Kiss concert, his elementary school teacher and principal called his parents in for a conference. "They told them they don't feel comfortable with me talking about going to see the devil," says Dunsford. "I was nine."

He was drawn to GN'R for some of the same reasons lots of people were. The band's early music seemed to catalyze a host of dark, ugly emotions into a powerful yawp of defiance. "You listen to *Appetite* and it just kind of punches you in the face," he says. "There's just something about the band. I can just relate to everything with them."

As Dunsford got older, his passion for music intensified, as did the problems it caused him: "I went through a lot of bullying and abuse. I got jumped in a locker room and got a busted eardrum because I had long hair and liked this kind of music. I was forced to drop out because of the violence." (He later got his GED.)

Feeling like an outcast in his hometown, by the late Nineties, Dunsford had found a refuge of like-minded souls in the world of GN'R online forums – never mind that there was very little happening with the band itself. Between 1995 and the beginning of 2001, GN'R played exactly zero live shows and released one song. During this period, Rose retreated from public view like a latter-day Howard Hughes.

Amid this void, the less-dedicated fans lost interest, leaving a hardcore group who feasted on any scraps of information they could scrounge. Every paparazzi photo of Rose would be studied for clues to his mind state. Fans would discuss a stray quote from a band member with the dedication of Talmudic scholars.

This sense of scarcity was foundational to the fan community. Anyone with access to new music or information – or anyone perceived to

PREVIOUS SPREAD: IMAGES IN ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN KANE/WIREIMAGE; FRANK MICELOTTA/IMAGEDIRECT/GETTY IMAGES; ANDREW MEARES/FAIRFAX MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES; JEFFREY GREENBERG/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: ANDREA MORALES FOR 'ROLLING STONE'; GIE KNAEPS/GETTY IMAGES; FRANK MICELOTTA/IMAGEDIRECT/GETTY IMAGES

– has cachet. Unreleased music is the most prized of all currencies.

GN'R fans who manage to procure unreleased tracks, or even snippets of them, fall into two basic categories: hoarders and leakers. Hoarders keep whatever they find for themselves or share only with a handful of trusted friends. Leakers distribute it to the rest of the fans. Within the community, hoarders are both despised and venerated. They're viewed as anti-democratic elitists, but they're insiders with something everyone wants. On occasion, a hoarder may sell unreleased material or trade it – and some make real money doing this – but they intuitively understand the scarcity principle. If they distribute music widely, it not only puts them at risk legally, it also erases the music's value and endangers their heightened status.

Within some circles, prying music out of reluctant hoarders by lying, double-dealing, and other forms of subterfuge is considered noble work. "MSL," the former pro wrestler, initially made a splash in 2007 by offering to pay thousands of dollars to anyone willing to send him unreleased *Chinese Democracy* tracks, then tricking another fan into sending him four unreleased songs and leaking them. "No money changed hands," he told me. "It was just hustle and dumb luck." Similar schemes have proliferated since. A certain level of treachery and malevolence has become commonplace.

"It's a scary bunch," says Chris Kooluris, who's known on the forums as "Kaneda." "I've been physically threatened. People have said they're going to fly to New York and kick my ass. It's toxic." Kooluris works as a PR executive, and in fact was the one who cooked up the Dr Pepper giveaway. He thinks something about the band draws in the dysfunctional and the damaged. "When you look at the lyrics of *Appetite,* Axl is sort of reclusive, misogynistic, aggressive yet heartfelt, all mixed together. It attracts people that fall outside the mainstream. It's music that allows you to tap into your inner anger, your inner insecurities."

By the time of *Chinese Democracy*'s official release, most of its songs had already leaked, occasionally in dramatic fashion – including one, bizarrely, when then-New York Mets catcher Mike Piazza brought a CD-R of unreleased songs to Eddie Trunk's radio show. The album's anticlimactic arrival fed the fans' thirst for more music. Suggestions from Rose and others that the album was intended as part of a trilogy, and that there was enough music to fill several albums, convinced some fans there was a lost classic just gathering dust in the band's vault.

In light of this, many fans have come to resent GN'R's secrecy and stinginess with new music. "The band should've figured out a way to manage their community online in a more positive way, instead of keeping them in the dark for so many years," says Kooluris. "They've created all these monsters who just want to pillage, steal, and grab whatever they can get because they don't feel like they've ever been appreciated by the band. . . . It's like Stockholm syndrome. They're chained up in the basement, they haven't been outside for years, so they act in unhealthy ways.

"It's more than the music," he continues. "These people are looking for belonging. . . . But these guys invest so much that it distracts them from being happy. Because you're not going to be happy if you're all in on GN'R."

USE YOUR ILLUSION
Clockwise from top: GN'R with Zutaut (white T-shirt) in 1986; one of the CDs from the Village Recorder sessions that leaked; GN'R superfan and former wrestling villain "MSL."

IN EARLY MARCH 2019, two storage units went up for auction at a CubeSmart in Culpepper, Virginia. Both had belonged to Tom Zutaut, the former A&R executive who'd originally signed GN'R. In 2001, when the band was working on *Chinese Democracy,* Zutaut was brought in for about nine months, one of many who tried and failed to bring the project to a happy conclusion. By 2016, he was living in Virginia and had declared bankruptcy. In 2019, shortly before he relocated, this time to Chattanooga, Tennessee, the fees went unpaid on the storage units. (Zutaut declined to be interviewed for this story.)

Sheri Gaines, a nurse in Virginia who buys and sells the contents of storage units as a sideline, got one of the units, paying $750. In it, she found mostly *Use Your Illusion*-era GN'R recordings and memorabilia, along with items from other bands Zutaut worked with. She sold the most valuable stuff on eBay. "I didn't have to worry about a semester at college for one of my kids," she says. "This was the holy grail of storage units in my world."

Robert Bird bought the other unit. Bird is an engineer who, like Gaines, flips storage lockers as an occasionally profitable hobby. He declined to speak on the record for this story, but in a podcast he posted and later deleted, he explained that he found about 40 different gold records in the unit, along with CDs, tapes, photographs, and memorabilia. At first, he didn't even notice the CD-Rs of unreleased GN'R material. "It was days later, after I started researching everything, that I realized . . . they were copied, burned discs," he said in the podcast. "Some of them had a label on the inside that said they were from a music studio in Hollywood."

The studio was Village Recorder, the legendary birthplace of Steely Dan's *Aja,* Fleetwood Mac's *Tusk,* and Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*. GN'R moved their base of operations there in 2000. Nineteen of the CD-Rs Bird found in the locker were rough mixes from the 2000-01 Village sessions. They included complete songs, instrumentals, rehearsals, and alternate versions of previously released material. The sessions were legendary among fans. Nothing had ever leaked from them. This, they believed, was where they'd find their lost classic.

Bird posted some items on eBay. According to his podcast, he was contacted by a lawyer from New York who was a hardcore GN'R collector. The lawyer, who Dunsford later identified in his legal settlement with GN'R as Levi Lipton, is an occasional presence on GN'R forums as "levisnuts." He didn't respond to emails, texts, and calls about this story. As Bird recalled in his podcast, Lipton drove to Virginia and bought the 19 CD-Rs, along with DVDs and tapes of live GN'R performances and a few other items for a sum that many in the GN'R community peg to be in the low five-figures. "He said it was for himself," said Bird on his podcast. "He was never going to release them . . . just stick them in a safe and enjoy them for the rest of his life."

A 27-year-old superfan named Mario, who asked to withhold his last name, says that Lipton shared news of his score with him. Mario revealed what he'd learned about this

FROM TOP: MARC S. CANTER/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF RICK DUNSFORD; COURTESY OF MLW

music to Dunsford. The year before, Dunsford had become a mover in this community when he'd gotten his hands on a long-coveted item: a professionally shot video of the first post-Slash GN'R show, featuring the new lineup at the House of Blues in Las Vegas, from 2001. How he got the video is a convoluted tale involving Madeline, MSL, $2,000, and the specter of an FBI cybercrime investigation. At one point, Dunsford stopped taking MSL's calls, then got a text from Madeline: "msl says if you care about your kids to get on the phone right now."

Dunsford took this as a genuine threat. MSL says it was a misunderstanding. He thought Dunsford planned to leak the video and was advising against it. "What I said was, 'I've been in similar circumstances, and I don't want this guy to end up in jail,' " says MSL. It wasn't the only time someone in GN'R-land felt threatened by MSL, who's currently COO of Major League Wrestling and used to host the upstart wrestling outfit's televised and live events. "A lot of that is wrestling shtick," he says. "I was a wrestling villain for decades, so that sometimes blurs the line of how people look at me."

When Mario told Dunsford about the Village sessions music, Dunsford sprang into action. He tracked down Bird and offered him $20,000 for the tracks. Bird wasn't interested. A frustrated Dunsford messaged GN'R's manager, Fernando Lebeis, informing him that this material had been auctioned from Zutaut's locker and that Lipton had bought it. "This is to pass onto who ever handles this," Dunsford wrote. "Don't want to see this stuff leaking until band is ready for us to hear it." Lebeis had previously maintained a friendly rapport with Dunsford but didn't immediately respond; he did not agree to be interviewed for this story.

Dunsford then posted the information about the music and who had it on the MyGNR.com forum under his username, "axlrosefan4life." The fan community quickly went into full meltdown over the possibility the Village sessions might be heard. But Dunsford says he couldn't get either Bird or Lipton to make a deal. Then he had an idea: He texted Bird and told him Lipton had sold the music to at least two others.

"Wtf he lied to me," Bird replied, taking Dunsford at his word. "I turned down 30k from a guy in Dallas because levi made some bleeding heart about being a collector." The ploy seemed to sway Bird. "Levi wasn't making a deal," Dunsford says. "I had to twist the story a bit . . . but that's the game you had to play with [Bird] to get this. That's kind of wrong on my part."

Dunsford had begun collecting money from investors in the fan community on the promise he'd share the music with them, but only had about $12,000. Bird had agreed in principle to $15,000, but factoring in last-minute airfare, Dunsford offered him $10,500. Bird declined, noting in a text that now that word was out, "people are offering me stupid money for it."

Dunsford said he'd raise more. "Thanks, but I think we are through here," Bird wrote.

"GN'R should've figured out a way to manage their community online in a more positive way. They've created all these monsters who want to pillage whatever they can."

Dunsford replied: "Wait my brother just got with me. I've got the 15K." (He didn't.)

"If your here tomorrow text or call, but that is all I can do at this point," Bird wrote.

That was all the encouragement Dunsford needed. His wife – who'd just given birth to their son, Axl, three weeks earlier – packed him a meal, and he set off in their Dodge minivan. He had a day to get to Virginia and raise the rest of the money. Hence the stop in Charlotte to pick up Madeline, who, according to Dunsford, promised to kick in $2,000 but only brought about $500.

Dunsford insists he got the remainder and arrived at the Panera with $15,000. In his podcast, Bird said he brought only $12,000. The deal went through regardless. Dunsford drove to his sister's house to spend the night before starting the trip home. He sent two tracks, "Hard Skool" and "Atlas Shrugged," to his investors, promising the rest once he got back to Blue Mountain. According to Dunsford, that night he found Madeline at a computer with the thumb drive and worried she was trying to send tracks to MSL, who hadn't invested. Dunsford snatched the thumb drive and slept with it under his pillow. (In an interview, Madeline claimed, "I wasn't really involved in any of that stuff." Shortly after, she ended that call.)

WHILE DUNSFORD WAS driving back to Mississippi, he recorded a 77-second cell-phone video of his car stereo playing "Atlas Shrugged," and shared it with another fan, who converted it into an audio clip, which leaked. A 22-second clip of "Hard Skool" also leaked around this time. Before he'd even gotten home, Dunsford got an email from Lebeis, GN'R's manager. "So I keep hearing your name involved with the leaks," Lebeis wrote. "I hope them not to be true, as I have always been friendly to you and others."

Dunsford told Lebeis what had transpired and agreed to cooperate in helping to stop further leaks of the music. In a legal settlement Dunsford signed in early August with GN'R, he agreed to surrender all copies of the unreleased music, not to share it, and to provide names and contact information of anyone he'd already sent tracks to. In return, GN'R would reimburse Dunsford the $15,000 he told them he'd paid for the thumb drive so he could make his investors whole. They also promised him a VIP ticket for two GN'R shows that November in Las Vegas.

For days, the GN'R community had been intently following Dunsford's quest for this music via the message boards. At Lebeis' urging, though, Dunsford stopped posting. "I go quiet, and these fans were furious because they think I led them on," says Dunsford. "They were posting information about my mother, my children, pictures of my family, messaging my wife, talking about breaking into my house."

On Aug. 24, shortly after Dunsford received the $15,000 from GN'R and reimbursed his investors, "Hard Skool" leaked in full. In the days that followed there was a steady drip of further releases, mostly alternate versions of songs from *Chinese Democracy*. They became known as the "Numbers leaks" because they were posted to a forum by an email address that was a series of numbers.

In early September, Dunsford got a letter from Doug Mark, an attorney representing GN'R, which accused him of breaching the earlier settlement. Dunsford had informed Lebeis about sending "Hard Skool" and "Atlas Shrugged" prior to the settlement, but the agreement Dunsford signed didn't reflect that information. The letter demanded repayment of the $15,000 and informed Dunsford he'd be on the hook for further damages as well.

In mid-September, the contents of entire CD-Rs from Zutaut's locker started to leak. Each leak was accompanied by a poem credited to "The Chairman." The poems name-checked well-known GN'R fans, cracked inside jokes, and took swipes at the hoarders. "By the way, so you know, tonight this is solo/Your patience is appreciated, as more hoarders say 'Oh no!' " goes the stanza of one. "Oh for the record, don't include Rick/He may not be perfect, but he's not really a dick."

These so-called "Chairman leaks" gradually dumped nearly all of the music from Zutaut's locker onto the internet. On Oct. 7, Dunsford flew to Wichita, Kansas, to see GN'R perform. As he waited in line at the arena, he received an email from Mark informing him he'd "not be permitted to enter any venue where my client is performing." He was yanked from the line and refused entry. As he sat outside the venue during the show, the 19th and final CD-R leaked.

Four days later, Dunsford got a letter from Donald Zakarin, a lawyer representing the Universal Music Group, Interscope's parent company. It blamed Dunsford for posting the recordings, as well as selling them. It also accused him of breaching his earlier settlement. It notified him that should UMG [*Cont. on 80*]

We Hunt Killers

60 One of the thousands of victims of cartel violence in Tijuana

At the height of Mexico's drug war, cartel assassins roamed our streets. Inside the legendary crew of federal agents who caught them BY PAUL SOLOTAROFF

You never forget your first murderer, they say —

though few cops recall the killers they caught as charitably as Vargas does. At the wheel of his seven-seat Escalade – a car that drives like an opium dream and is fancied equally by narco bosses and the retired federal agents who chased them – Vargas speaks of the Camacho-Higuera brothers like promising kids who made a rash mistake. That isn't, strictly speaking, the official view. The brothers were the nephews of Ismael (El Mayel) Higuera-Guerrero, the chief of operations for the Arellano-Félix Organization. For most of the 1990s till the mid-to-late aughts, the AFO ran Tijuana, Mexico, like a Chicago slaughterhouse. It killed and beheaded street cops, cooked the flesh of its rivals on flaming tires, and delivered bodies by the hundreds to a man it called El Pete. Pete then dissolved the corpses into chunks of stew and poured the liquid remains down a drain. The AFO didn't invent those horrors, but it certainly seemed to take more relish than most in its merry disembowelment of the dead.

Vargas, who retired last summer as a supervisory agent for Customs and Border Patrol, doesn't despise the cartels or demonize the killers who did their grunt work. Those "mopes," as he calls them – the hit men, kidnappers, bent cops, and smugglers – were pawns in an industry with no way out, and whose wages were generally paid in blood. "Not to excuse them, but these people are human," he says. "They have wives, they have kids; someone loves them." (Vargas – at the insistence of his wife and children – asked that I change his name. So, too, did the other cops on his squad who spoke to me for this story, out of concerns for their safety and that of their loved ones.)

His solicitude aside, Vargas hunted those men to the exclusion of all else. While his friends and colleagues at the alphabet shops (the FBI, DEA, ATF, et al.) obsessed over the top-of-org-chart types – the kingpins, lieutenants, and logistics wizards of the cartels – Vargas went after their murderous gunsels on the streets of San Diego. He and his extraordinary team of trackers – a crew of six detectives in the Criminal Aliens Squad (or CRIM, for short) – did something undreamed of in the nearly 100-year history of the CBP. Rather than chase migrants, they chased menaces instead, and caught 300 felons in five years. In the process, Vargas flipped the role of Border Patrol agents: He turned them into bloodhounds for other feds. "Because we were quote-unquote 'Immigration,' we could sack up bad guys no one else could touch," he says. "Even if they had a legal right to be here, we had tools to take them off the chessboard."

"They could reach out and touch anyone on this side. Even bad guys who weren't on our radar," says Steve Duncan, a retired special agent for the California Department of Justice. Duncan was assigned to the Group One Task Force, a legendary squad of state and federal agents who broke the AFO after 20 years.

That list includes Carlos and Ismael Camacho-Higuera, the hothead brothers whom Vargas' squad collared in the spring of 2006. "They were narco-juniors working their way up the line: moving loads across for AFO," Vargas says. In the fall of 2003, one of their U.S. clients flew to Baja California to do a drug deal. While sitting and drinking beer at the brothers' house, the buyer remarked on the shrine they'd erected to their imprisoned Uncle Mayel, the cartel capo. (Mayel had been busted by the Mexican army in 2000 and sentenced to serve decades in prison.) "If Mayel's such a badass, what's he doing in a cell?" snarked the visitor, misreading the room by a mile of blow. Some days later, he was found in the mountains; 18 slugs were fished out of him. "There are certain jokes you don't make," says Vargas. "To those boys, their Uncle Mayel was a saint."

I haven't met a fed as empathetic as Vargas in 20 years of covering the War on Drugs. Of the 14-year-old sicario who beheaded another kid, then casually confessed to the cops, Vargas winces, saying, "I talked to his mother. He had a brutal childhood; he was raised by the streets from age seven." Of the man they called El Yeyo, a former cop in Tijuana who took part in AFO crimes so vile they don't bear summaries, "they told him, 'Take our money or take a bullet in the head.'" There's no animus or moral insult in his tone – just a feel for the context of such acts. It was his wide-lens view of the War on Drugs that made Vargas a brilliant cop: the ability to see patterns, not pointless depravity, in the crooks coming over from Tijuana. From those patterns – and a set of underutilized laws – Vargas built a web to catch cartel killers before they killed again, in the U.S.

Cartels don't send many killers anymore; instead, they just send poison. In 2021, 107,000 Americans died of overdoses, two-thirds of which were caused by synthetics, according to a high-ranking official with the DEA, who, for political reasons, asked that I not name him. "Six of every 10 pills we seize off the street carry a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl," he adds. "Those pills are mass-produced by the cartels – and their chemists don't care about dose strength. For every 100,000 they kill in this country, they know there are 3 million users right behind them."

Still, we've never before had an account of the days when sicarios roamed our streets, hunting civilians and fellow soldiers on U.S. soil. Vargas, a hand-to-hand combatant of that war, is taking me on a tour of his biggest busts in San Diego. Over there, off H Street, is the mini mart where Vargas' CRIM Squad ambushed Furcio and a woman. Furcio (cartel slang for "big ears"; real name: Andrés Ramos Castillo) ran a crew of hit men who were hunting for Los Palillos, according to Vargas. The Palillos, a maniacal squad of sicarios who had turned against the AFO, were gunning for yet a third crew of killers in San Diego. Vargas shows me the place on Brandywine Street where the Palillos ditched a van stacked with corpses. When the stench summoned the cops, they found the van

Contributing editor PAUL SOLOTAROFF *wrote "The Dog Rescuers" in the July-August issue.*

full of cash; there were toothpicks strewn across the victims' corpses. "They left the cash to show that this was vengeance, not money," says Vargas. "Toothpicks were their calling card." ("Palillo," of course, is "toothpick" in Spanish.)

The madness of such doings in a setting this splendid is hard to reconcile. East Chula Vista is a magic place, the topographical love child of the American Southwest and the Pacific Ocean. It climbs the khaki foothills of the Otay Mountains as it takes the eastbound pass out of San Diego. Pines and jacarandas shade the rutless roads that jog by ivy walls of gated enclaves. A salt breeze scrubs the air a shade of topaz-blue, and the light that hits the roofs of these seven-figure villas gives the low spark of high-heeled money. With one note of grace that bears mentioning here: Nearly everyone is brown. Here, the American dream goes big – a class of Mexican strivers who came, saw, and conquered for the right to be soccer moms.

We loop back down to the suburbs of National City, where Vargas' CRIM Squad cornered the Camacho-Higuera brothers. On K Street stands the complex where the brothers were hiding. The buildings in National City are old and stooped. Backed by a tactical unit, Vargas' squad approached the door. One of the brothers answered when they knocked politely; as they cuffed him, the other brother pulled up. He parked behind the building and met a second car. Feds with long guns swarmed both cars. They arrested four men, including the brother. One of the other collars was a kid they called Pelon, a.k.a. Ponciano Frausto-Lopez. His name rang a bell; he was connected to Los Palillos, the gang that was shooting up San Diego. Pelon, however, wasn't holding drugs or guns, so they brought him to the station, then cut him loose.

Within hours, Vargas' CRIM Squad was handing off the brothers to their Mexican counterparts at the border. There used to be a gate there called Whiskey Two: a door in the wall that only the feds could unlock. The brothers froze; one of them shrieked as men in balaclavas dragged them off. "The police there play by different rules," says Vargas. "They do what you'd call 'enhanced interrogations,' " which may or may not feature a shaken can of Coke sprayed up the nostrils of detainees. Vargas wasn't told what crimes the brothers copped to, but he does know a couple of salient facts. First: The brothers got decades in prison. Second: They were the lucky ones. That kid they called Pelon? He was last seen in a bar, then taken, tortured, and dismembered. His killer, an AFO lieutenant named Victor Escobar-Luna, had a compelling motive. Pelon's crew had kidnapped Escobar-Luna's brother, then killed him despite being paid a ransom. Rather than make Pelon "stew," however, Escobar-Luna stored his remains in a freezer. "Whenever [Escobar-Luna] moped about his brother," says Duncan, "he'd go and open the freezer. I guess that's what [sicarios] do for therapy."

Vargas (at far right, and with seized drugs below) with the elite squad of Border Patrol agents he assembled. "We were soldiers bagging soldiers," he says. "They never told us more than we had to know."

WITH APOLOGIES TO *Narcos* and the countless films and series sipping from the goblet of cartel content, there's little or no profit rehashing the narco feuds that have exacted a hellish toll, making life all but lawless for our southern neighbors. Since the big-bang moment of mob butchery in 1993 – the unintended murder of Archbishop Posadas by a crew of hit men aiming for El Chapo – narco warfare has claimed or poisoned millions of Mexican lives. Kingpins like Chapo are now imprisoned or dead, their empires a jumble of chockablock shards that their successors kill to reclaim. Journalists, police chiefs, women, and tourists: Everyone's in the crosshairs these days. Of the 10 deadliest cities, per capita, in the world, Mexico scores five or six in a given year.

It's an article of faith among the men and women who patrol our southwest flank: What happens in Mexico doesn't stay there. In cities that host a major port of entry – Laredo and El Paso, Texas, and Nogales, Arizona, for starters – there's a complex balance between commerce and crime for cops to confront. Nowhere is that riddle harder to solve than in greater San Diego. By all objective measures, it's a model metropolis. Ranked among America's safest, cleanest towns, it's praised for fiscal health by good-governance groups, and exalted for both its beaches and civic stability.

But it's also home to the busiest border crossing of any land-based port outside of China. Seventy thousand vehicles travel north each day, as do 20,000 workers walking in from Tijuana. Once across the border, it's a straight shot up I-5 to the distribution hub of Los Angeles. Meanwhile, under the border, dozens of narco tunnels link warehouse districts on either side of the fence. Through those durable holes pour billions of dollars a year in fentanyl, methamphetamine, and the tainted pharmaceuticals that kill U.S. teens on campuses every day.

All of which explains why the plaza of Tijuana is paved in blood and treasure. It is where Chapo commissioned his first tunnels, baiting the AFO into a gunfight. It is where the AFO, a clan of seven brothers, killed anyone else who trucked product through their streets without kicking up to the family. And it is where, after the brothers' arrests or violent deaths – one of them, Ramon, was shot by a cop; a second, Francisco, was shot by a clown at his 64th-birthday party – war broke out between a series of butchers who broke the golden rule: Don't kill civilians, especially rich ones.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: GUILLERMO ARIAS/AP IMAGES

The worst of said butchers was the monster called El Teo. A lackey who killed his way up the ladder as an enforcer for the AFO, he rose to lieutenant, then broke with the AFO when the last brother fell in 2008. He announced his intention to seize the plaza with a shootout that left 13 people dead. From that day forward, the streets ran dark with blood. Each morning dawned on fresh atrocities: corpses hung from the balustrades of bridges; cops beheaded and their bodies arrayed to spell out Teo's nickname: 3L. Teo, untouchable, paraded through town in his convoy of SUVs, while his crews snatched innocents off the streets and tortured them to squeeze money from their families. "He killed doctors and the middle class, even when they paid the ransom," says a Mexican official we'll call Seven. Seven, a former police chief of Tijuana, worked closely with Vargas for most of a decade. They would often meet discreetly at a 7-Eleven in San Ysidro – he liked the American Slurpees better than Tijuana's. "Teo dumped them in the street with their fingers off, and bruises all over their body," says Seven.

It was into this crucible that Vargas stepped when he took over the CRIM Squad in 2007. For the next five years, he and his men slept in their cars, rarely getting home to hug their wives and kids. Instead, they put in 90-hour weeks, flushing out narcos who had sneaked across the border to kill or kidnap targets in San Diego. No one told them how those captures linked to El Teo or his enemy, Fernandito, of the AFO. They were miners with their heads down, sifting through the dirt. It would be years before they learned the value of what they'd found: the bodies that brought a SWAT team to Teo's door.

"I brought in CRIM Squad 'cause those guys were regulators. The best bunch of hunters you ever saw."

IN 1998, VARGAS joined the Border Patrol, when it was strictly a reactive force. "Line watch" was the mission of most of its agents: waiting in their Broncos for "illegals" to cross, then chasing them down and cuffing them for deportation. It was lonely, joyless labor, as Vargas learned. One night, he was sitting in his SUV in the pitch-black desert of Arizona. He and a second agent were parked mirror to mirror, when they heard an H-1 Hummer belching toward them. "We flipped on our wig-wags [dome lights] to tell them, 'Don't even try us tonight.' " The next thing Vargas heard was a fusillade of bullets blasting out the windows of his partner's truck. Hopelessly overmatched – there was a machine gun mounted on the turret of the Hummer – the agents fled in separate directions and called for backup, which never came. "Back at the office, I'm filing my assault-on-a-federal-officer [report], and the supe's like, 'Whatever. That shit happens all the time.' "

That shit, Vargas learned in his four years watching the line, was the basic working condition for uniformed Border Patrol agents. They were pelted with bags and bottles of piss by gangsters standing on ladders at the fence. Cinder blocks crashed through the windshields of their trucks as they prowled the frontage roads looking for smugglers. But those four years in uniform taught Vargas two things: The first was how to track men who wished to go unseen. The second was that he never again wanted to wait around for his target to come at him.

So when he was promoted, in 2004, to a plainclothes desk job at a station near San Diego, the first thing he did was attach himself to detectives in the Anti-Smuggling Unit of CBP. He pumped them for ways to mine national-security databases, looking for felons who'd been jailed and deported, but who'd snuck back in with false papers. He picked up tricks for poking holes in statements from the felons they'd arrested for smuggling. "Anyone can tell a lie start to finish," he says. "But make 'em tell it backwards and you find the holes. That's when the truth comes out."

Above all, he learned that the great detectives aren't "solar-driven," i.e., arriving at nine and leaving at five. On evenings and weekends, he'd prowl the web for open-source leads on fugitives. Anyone could be found, once you knew where to look. The key was sifting through traces, then putting in the time, sitting vigil on suspects' houses after-hours. He'd go on to make CRIM Squad in his image: six guys who'd show up, no questions asked, to tail a narco's car at 3 a.m. They all spoke fluent Spanish and could pass for sicarios – minus the gold Breitlings and Jesus pieces.

"We'd all done the cowboy stuff, chasing FTYs on I-5," says Sito, the youngest – and most fearless – of the CRIM Squad agents, having served a brutal tour in Afghanistan. (FTY, or failure to yield, is BP shorthand for high-speed pursuits.) "But with Vargas, it was all about the intel-building. Debriefing every collar to get the next guy up the ladder, then doing surveils for five days straight."

"Yeah, the hours were just stupid – but he worked 'em same as we did: four in the morning till whenever," says Guru, the workout fanatic and know-it-all gun nut who could fieldstrip an M-4 blindfolded. "We were together so much, we turned the office into our dungeon. Kettlebells here, chinning bar there – and every fucking set was a contest."

Vargas, an undersized nose guard in college, still looks like he squats 400 in his fifties. His parents, Mexican migrants, slaved for their sons and sent both of them into public service. Raised in a barrio east of Los Angeles, Vargas saw how thin the line was for brown-skinned boys. On this side, the ones who worked their tails off after school; on that side, the ones who flaked in 10th grade and wound up on the yard. But Vargas brought more than a grinder's grit: He was also, by nature, a connector. Each morning, before work, he would cold-call different shops, chatting up the point man on an anti-gang task force or a higher-up at the FBI's off-site. He wasn't just friending cops and fishing for cases. He was also bringing goodies to share with other teams that were chasing after cartel hit men.

Among those goodies was something called TECS – an exclusive database of every person, vehicle, boat, plane, or shipment entering the United States through a port of entry. Even killers with forged IDs left footprints to follow: a time stamp of arrival; an alias to cross-check; a set of known associates to surveil. "There were Border Patrol detectives who'd used TECS to look out for returned felons – wife beaters, child molesters, that kind of thing," says Vargas. "But we were the first to say, 'Hey, there are cartel murderers here. Those are the ones we should be hunting.' "

Back then, DHS was the only outfit that could file certain charges against narcos: illegal entry after deportation; illegal alien with a gun; human smuggling, etc. Any violation of immigration law could take killers off the streets at a moment's notice. Better still, you could arrest perps without them even knowing that they were part of a larger sting. They'd think they were facing fed time for sneaking across the border with a gun and a fake ID. Their bosses and crews would think so, too, and go on about their business – till the task force or DEA dropped the hammer.

"They called it 'walling off': bringing pretext charges" while the long-term operation carried on, says Duncan. "That was very useful to teams

like ours – and no one really did it before Vargas. There wasn't a lot of sharing going on."

Long after the failures of intelligence sharing that helped lead to 9/11, the three-letter law-enforcement agencies don't play nicely together, guarding their territory fiercely. But Vargas had no use for parochial nonsense and would help anyone who helped him. Beat cops, staties, the Mexican CIA: He built the kind of alliances you could win a war with – though not, alas, the War on Drugs. They'll still be fighting that one when the sea floods San Diego, and the waves raise all the dead in Mexicali.

JUST WEEKS AFTER clocking in as CRIM Squad chief, Vargas got pinged by an FBI buddy about a very odd kidnap in San Diego. The kidnap wasn't the story, but its punchline was: The victim wound up captive in Tijuana. "The guy's drinking at a bar and meets a girl who takes him home," says Vargas. "Next thing he knows, he's chained up to a sink, with a big red welt on his ass." The welt, said Vargas' source, was from an elephant gun – the kind used at zoos to dart big game. "That was all they told me, along with a name. The perp was some dude called Furcio."

Usually, Vargas' crew could take a nickname and get rolling, but Furcio was on no one's radar screen. Still, Vargas turned over every rock: kidnaps were a menace in San Diego. "When the killing went over the top [in 2007], Mexico sent the army to Tijuana," says Duncan, the task force leader working the AFO. "That put the clamps on narcotics coming in, so the gangs needed another source of income." Mexican businessmen were snatched for ransom in Tijuana and San Diego. One of Vargas' neighbors was targeted by the Palillos. That botched abduction ended in a firefight between their hit squad and a Chula Vista cop.

Vargas checked in with his cartel sources: There were three kidnap crews in San Diego. The scariest of the bunch were Los Palillos, motivated by vengeance, not profit. Back in the day, they'd been enforcers for the AFO, hurting anyone who crossed the brothers. Till one drunken night in 2003, when a Palillo punched an AFO in-law. The AFO retaliated by kidnapping and torturing a Palillo leader. The cops found his corpse wrapped in a garden hose; his crew hastily fled to San Diego. For the next four years, the Palillos terrorized that town, snatching AFO associates, holding them hostage, and, when they felt like it, returning them alive. Often, they got their ransom but killed the captive; they murdered 14 people in two states. "The AFO sent their hit squads here to try and take them out," says Duncan, who led the Palillos investigation. "Either shoot them on the street or bring them south."

Top: Mexican police discover mass graves where the cartel boss El Teo disposed of hundreds of victims. Above: El Pozolero being arrested; he dissolved bodies in vats of acid for El Teo and the cartels.

Furcio led one of those hit-man crews. But in the meantime, he had to earn a living in San Diego; reports cropped up about people being plucked off the streets by men in a panel van. The victims weren't gangsters, just random civilians held for sums in the low five figures. Nor did their non-cartel status lead their captors to spare them brutalities: They chopped off the fingers of a man and sent them to his loved ones as proof of their bad intentions.

Vargas first heard of Furcio in the fall of 2007. He expected to track him down in weeks, if not days, because that was how it went with his bloodhound crew. "We don't do like the FBI, where they're up on a wire forever," says Sito. "We'll hunt anyone we think might know you. We'll put trackers on your mom's car and tail her to church, if that's what it takes to find you."

For months, CRIM Squad members worked lead after lead, sitting on addresses from East Lake to Poway on tips from Vargas' informants. Now, surveillance is not what you've seen onscreen: two cops hunkered in an unmarked car, chatting and wolfing fast food to fend off boredom. Instead, it's one detective in the back seat of his car, laying under a sheet perfectly still. Often, they're in boxer briefs sweating it out, because the car and its A/C are off all day and there's nothing but window tinting to fade the San Diego sun. "You pull in at 5 a.m. and lay there till nine, not moving while you piss in a bottle," says Guru. "Nights are even longer, 'cause now you're on crook time – and they don't work steady hours."

It took months, but CRIM Squad got a fix on its target – by way of a gangland slaying. In February 2008, Furcio was drinking with some friends at a condo in the Camelot Apartments. When the beer ran low, he sent the friends for more, tossing them the keys to his Cadillac. As they got in the car, a van pulled up. Three men with rifles opened fire. One of the friends fell dead. Another was abducted. He'd later tell the cops what the gunmen told him: Furcio was their target, and they'd botched the hit. They'd thought that was him in the Caddy.

"At this point, everyone's looking for Furcio, figuring there's a bloodbath popping off," says Vargas. But Furcio went to ground after the botched hit, and the trail promptly stopped cold. The other feds moved on to fresher cases. Only Vargas kept a burner lit for Furcio while he and his squad were out chasing narcos. Case in point: their takedown of the Linda Vista-13. A subset of Mexican-mafia wannabes, they'd moved to San Diego as minors and been busted for cartel crimes as adults. Then, one of their members stabbed a San Diego cop; Vargas and his men were summoned. For six weeks, they surveilled gang addresses and caught them out with one thing or another. Fifteen gang members got jail time, then were deported back to Mexico for good. Their set dissolved and was never heard from again. "We wiped 'em off the face of the Earth," says Sito.

Finally, that November, they caught up with Furcio, after a yearlong manhunt. Vargas got a tip from a friend at ATF; he sent Guru to sit on the address. "I had just put my sunshade up for [a long surveil]" when here came Furcio walking toward him. Guru called Vargas. Vargas called in backup, but they were 20 minutes south in traffic, so Guru tailed Furcio in his Cadillac with blacked-out rims. Furcio pulled off at the H Street exit and stopped at the AmPm mart. Vargas got there just as the backup roared up. Eight men in armor poured out of a van with rifles. Furcio saw them and turtled in his seat. He looked stunned when they pulled him from the Caddy and cuffed him – he surely assumed he was about to be killed.

Back at the station, feds lined up in Vargas' office. The FBI, DEA, ATF, Group One: Everyone but the Secret Service wanted a crack at Furcio. But Vargas made the collar, so he went into the interrogation room first. He had all the leverage you could ask for with a perp. They'd found the elephant gun allegedly used on kidnap victims, plus his .45, false IDs, and fake-cop get-ups. But Furcio, a short, slight man in his thirties, didn't even blink through rounds of grilling. He had a story for everything. The tranquilizer gun was "protection" for hiking in the desert; the .45 kept him safe in the barrio. Nor could Vargas charge him on behalf of kidnap victims: None of them came forward to accuse him. He wound up doing fed time for the guns and fake IDs, then was handed to the Mexican military for sweating. They went at him good and hard, but couldn't break him, either. Released, he melted into the Tijuana streets – literally, per

GUILLERMO ARIAS/AP IMAGES, 2

one expert's guess. "There hasn't been a peep from him in, what, 12 years?" says Vargas. "When a guy like that goes quiet, the first thing you think is: His teeth are in a barrel on someone's ranch."

IN THE MICRO-CULTURE of cop land, word gets around when you catch a couple of high-end bad guys. By early 2009, Vargas was getting calls from the other top outfits in town. Dave Contreras, a boss with the Gang Suppression Team of the San Diego PD, asked for CRIM Squad's help with Operation Stampede, a massive, task-force takedown of the Southeast Locos. "That set was out of control, just stone-cold killers: five bodies in 15 months in Lincoln Park," says Contreras, who's now retired but working a cold case in Los Angeles. "I brought in CRIM Squad 'cause those guys were regulators. The best bunch of hunters you ever saw."

For that op, the hunt was tracking killers for months, then bagging them up just hours before a murder. "Because we were on wires, we knew when a hit was coming: We stopped at least 20 murders from taking place," says Contreras. CRIM Squad would find the perp, surveil him for weeks, then sack him up as he left to do his dirt. One of those collars was a guy named Anthony Zendejas, whom CRIM Squad popped holding a Molotov cocktail and an incendiary device. He was on his way over to burn down the house of a rival gangster. Another was Pariente, an older gangster who ran guns to the AFO. He lived in an alley behind Lincoln High School and sold meth and semi-autos to minors. "His whole business model was hurting kids," says Guru. "I loved bagging that guy: He was evil."

Finally, on May 1, 2009, 40 cops and feds – including CRIM Squad agents – kicked down the doors at five addresses. They arrested 21 suspects and seized 14 guns that day, and confiscated 60 keys of coke and methamphetamine over the course of the operation. Five of the Locos were charged with murder. The rest went down for conspiracy to murder and other violent crimes. It was the bust of the decade in San Diego, wiping the Southeast Locos off the gangland map and liberating the blocks they'd held by force. Contreras, the task-force chief, wrote CRIM Squad commendations; he calls them the "best federal unit I've ever worked with." That fall, they won the top state honor for cops who bring trafficking cases: the California Narcotics Officers Award. In hindsight, the certificate felt a tad premature for a crew that hadn't faced its greatest test. They'd earn it, and then some, in the months to come. El Teo's hit squad was coming north.

"We caught the worst of the worst. My kids know: If something happens to me, the first call is to these guys."

One day that fall, Vargas got a call from a DEA agent with the Group One Task Force whom I'll call Nikki. She and her team were hunting El Teo and his merry band of sadists in Tijuana. By now, half of Mexico was chasing Teo: He'd turned Tijuana – and most of the Baja peninsula – into an abattoir. Thousands murdered since 2007; dozens of cops assassinated by his goons; Mexican-army checkpoints in every barrio. "He committed the cardinal sin of narco bosses," says David Herrod, the case agent for the Group One Task Force. "He made things bad for business – everyone's business."

Group One had wires up on a couple of Teo's lieutenants; what they needed was real-time intel on his movements. Nikki had a name for Vargas to chase: "Tigre," Teo's leg man in the States. CRIM Squad sifted through their intel cross-checks, searched every alias linked to Tigre, and found a car connected to a name. In less than a week, they tracked it to an address. Sitting on that house, they spotted Tigre in a car. "We had a cop stop him for a traffic violation; we didn't want him knowing what was up," says Vargas. Back at the precinct, Vargas walked in and wasted no time on the niceties. *We know who you are and what you've done: You called in a hit on a TJ cop.* To prove it, Vargas showed him Teo's org chart. There, on the third rung, was Tigre's name and photo. He crumpled, agreeing to spill his guts. Then his cellphone rang: It was Teo.

Tigre's face went pale as he listened to Teo talk. By the time he hung up, Tigre had changed his mind; he wasn't going out in someone's crockpot. Enter Nikki, the Group One agent, with an offer of full protection. Tigre eyed her: *Why should I ever trust you?* She pointed to the poster on the wall behind her. It was the DEA's Most Wanted List, bearing the photos of 32 kingpins and their capos. At the bottom was a phone number. Dial it, said Nikki. Tigre did so. Her cellphone rang.

"It was a mic-drop moment," Vargas says. "The only thing he could do was sign the proffer. We not only got his phone but his total cooperation. Then we found the ledgers at his place."

Those ledgers – which Tigre parsed for Group One – were far more useful than profit-and-loss sheets. They identified, by code, "who was who in the zoo": the half-dozen or so narcos who spoke directly to Teo from either side of the border. One of them was a capo called "Timmy." He lived part time in San Diego, worked in Tijuana – and killed several TJ cops on Teo's behalf. No one knew Timmy was on U.S. soil till Vargas called his sources in Mexico. The PEPOS, or state police, had a file on him that they hadn't bothered to share with Group One. That stonewall was standard procedure, says Herrod. "The Mexican cops wouldn't help us out unless we showed them an actual indictment." But everyone in TJ helped out Vargas. He'd spent years going down there on his own dime to liaise with the state and city police and to train up street cops in intel tactics. With the PEPOS' information, he put an alert out on Timmy at all the border crossings. Weeks later, he got a call from Customs agents; they had Timmy in holding.

Timmy poured his heart out at the Group One off-site. In exchange for a stipend and a new place to live, he'd help them locate Teo and his lieutenants. No one at Group One would give me specifics on the nature of Timmy's assistance: He's still a "protected informant" 12 years after Teo's capture. What agent Herrod did convey was that their "actionable information" had been "useful" in the takedown of Teo's gang. In exchange, Timmy got the "Sammy the Bull [Gravano] deal," as Vargas calls it, sneering. "Umpteen murders and no time served. Plus a pat on the back from Uncle Sam."

Days later, he met Timmy himself at a mall in San Diego. He showed up armed, expecting the unexpected. What he got was a small, stubby man in a faux-hawk, mouthing the standard mob subjunctives. *Teo told me this… Teo told me that. What'm I gonna do, bro – it's Teo.* "Not an ounce of remorse: just an evil little shit who made my skin crawl," says Vargas. That night, after taking the long way home – he always changed his route after a face-to-face with narcos – Vargas got down on his knees and prayed. "I asked God, 'Please! Keep my wife and kids safe – and why are there people like that in the world?' "

WITH NO SMALL HELP from CRIM Squad, El Teo was arrested at a La Paz address in January 2010. Dozens of men in armor crashed his door; Blackhawk gunships circled overhead, anticipating a shootout with his men. But faced with "over-

whelming force," says Herrod, the butcher stood down without a peep. A month later, his top lieutenants were caught in Baja. His organization splintered, his stew-maker was jailed, and a fragile peace broke out in Tijuana. "Murders came down big-time; we set a record low that year," says Seven, the former police chief of the town. Tijuana's economy roared back, and so did its nightlife: "People weren't so scared of being shot," he says. The biggest cheers went up from TJ's cops, he adds. "He killed 60, 70 police in two years."

The response among U.S. cops was rather more restrained. The United States attorney in the Southern District of California failed to indict Teo for mass murder. That enraged Herrod and his Group One agents – but it didn't surprise them at all. "After the AFO trials, they'd made it pretty clear they were sick of trying cartel cases," he says. "Too much time, too much manpower, too much money invested. Better to just let Mexico lock 'em up." Herrod can't confirm that Teo was charged in Mexico, either, though he has been "indefinitely detained," says Seven. "They're supposed to charge you within six years, but sometimes they forget," he says, laughing. Such is the state of that judicial system that even an ex-police chief can't be sure that a genocidal ghoul has been sentenced.

CRIM Squad found little to rejoice in Teo's fall. In fact, they weren't even told that the arrests they'd made were material to his capture. "Eventually, I heard something about we'd played a part, but no one ever reached out and said so," says Vargas. "We were soldiers bagging soldiers. They never told us more than we had to know."

The only shine CRIM Squad got was from their peers in San Diego. News of their exploits was bannered large in bulletins the regional office put out. Young agents stopped them in the hallways: *Holy shit! You're the guys that sacked Furcio!* The honor that mattered most, though, came from CBP: It founded a weeklong school in CRIM Squad tactics. Called the SIG Academy, it was mandatory coursework for Border Patrol detectives in San Diego. The chief instructors: Vargas and his squad. "We taught everything from intel to mobile surveillance." To be sure, those are givens of investigative policing – but till CRIM Squad, no one did that at CBP.

They forever changed the game there, then went their separate ways. In 2010, CRIM Squad joined a bigger unit, the Border Crime Suppression Team. Vargas stayed on to supervise his section before drifting off to intelligence operations. His men jumped onto task-force units with the FBI and DEA. "You're attached to details with a bunch of shirt-and-tie guys; when that clock hits five o'clock, they're like, 'Seeya!' " says Sito. "It's a shock for a minute, but at least you see your kids. And to be honest, I was fried when we split up."

Late last summer, Vargas convenes the crew at a cantina in Otay Mesa. It is a curious spot for federal drug cops to dine: a high-end Hooters knockoff catering to narco-juniors and the surgically souped-up women they prefer. Seven of us sit there, sipping Don Julio and recalling the demons of yore. There was El Yeyo, the sad-sack TJ cop conscripted by Teo to fetch corpses to a guy called El Pozolero, who'd melt the bodies at his ranch. Vargas tracked Yeyo to an ex's in south L.A., then handed him off to the Mexican police. In his confession, Yeyo admitted to heinous acts with deadpan indifference. "But then he's asked if he was there when they cut a guy's dick off," says Vargas. "And he goes, 'Yeah – but I only held the camera!' "

ALFREDO ESTRELLA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

El Teo after the CRIM Squad's work led to the cartel leader's arrest in 2010. "Murders came down big-time," says one agent. The biggest cheers were from Tijuana's cops: "He killed 60, 70 police in two years."

So it goes for the best part of three hours. The squad members recount the killers they caught at their day jobs, including one guy working at a Cheesecake Factory, and a Sinaoloa hit man who hid in the States after fleeing Mexicali in 2002. And then there was El Chan, the notorious cop turned capo who had made his bones whacking Chapo's henchmen. When CRIM Squad caught up to him in 2010, he was laying low in Eastlake with two very attractive sisters, living the throuple high life in a McMansion.

"A Mexican who thought he was Mormon!" Sito cackles. "*Big Love* in Spanish – 'Grande Amor'!" CRIM Squad revoked Chan's B-1 visa and pushed him through the gate at Whiskey Two. Hours later, Chan was attacked by his rivals in Tijuana, touching off a two-day shootout. His cousin was among the six slain, along with a schoolgirl hit by stray gunfire.

For five years, these men had been part of something rare: an elite unit led by a brilliant cop who got complete buy-in from his squad. "They were the best – and worst – years of my life," says Sito. "This man worked us so hard, I'd pull up at my house and just nod out in the front seat." "I ended up divorced because of the hours," says Guru. "Not that I'm blaming the job for that. These guys were at my wedding, so she knew what she was in for." The Squadders drew so close, they'd spend their free time together. There were drunken Friday dinners at Vargas' house, the wives inside at the kitchen table, the cops on the patio, laughing their way through cases of Tecates. The ferocity of their mission; the foxhole esprit de corps; that sense of doing truly important work – for half a decade, these men fell in love with their jobs and, to no small degree, with one another. "We were lucky enough to say, 'We caught the worst of the worst,' " says Sito. "And to this day my kids know: If something happens to me, the first call they make is to these guys."

In light of their achievement, it seems like bad form to ask what all their labors had delivered. Weeks before that dinner, Tijuana went up in flames: Men in balaclavas stormed buses and vans and put them to the torch all over town. For three days, residents locked themselves indoors, waiting out the cartels' temper tantrum. "The bosses weren't happy and want to send a message: too much policing," says Seven, who left his post to work a detail in Immigration, after more than one attempt on his life. The murder rate has soared to peak-Teo levels. Chapo held the plaza following the fall of the AFO, but his capture in 2016 put the town up for grabs – and narcos, like nature, abhor a vacuum.

I speak to Vargas shortly after the Tijuana burnings. He's sitting on the veranda of his very handsome house, a few miles north of the border fence. He can't see the smoke but he can smell it, he says. "My next-door neighbor's a failed nation," he says. From his tone, it isn't clear which nation he has in mind: Mexico, the world's lead supplier of narcotics, or America, the world's lead consumer.

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Reviews

Music

MÅNESKIN'S ROCK & ROLL CIRCUS

The runway-ready Italian glam-punks wink their way to glory on their third album

By DAVID BROWNE

Måneskin

Rush!

ARISTA

REMEMBER WHEN rock stars were flamboyant, excessive, larger-than-life libertines? Neither do we, but Måneskin want to jog everyone's recall. *Rush!,* the third album by these former Eurovision winners and would-be rock saviors from Rome, works hard at living up to the exclamation point in its title.

If we're to believe them, Måneskin's world is one wicked bacchanalia after another, where weed, beer, cocaine, and "hot chicks" are all in sight, and lead singer Damiano David is, in his words, "a lion tamer/Of indecent behavior/Making love with danger." One minute, he's watching a fading, coked-up Nineties supermodel steal a Basquiat off a wall, and the next, he's being →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Bijou Karman

Måneskin's Victoria De Angelis

MÅNESKIN

flattered: "They ask me why I'm so hot, 'cause I'm Italiano."

To a degree, Måneskin have won the fight for their right to party: With their growing stardom, runway-glam fashion/makeup sense, and a guitarist (Thomas Raggi) who actually plays solos once in a while, Måneskin do feel like the only major-league rock band making any dent in the culture. If his rock-star credentials were in doubt, David boasts, in the slithering sleaze of "Time-zone," that he's so hot to see his lover that he's happy to pay double the fare to change a flight and mess with his schedule: "I don't give a shit about the contracts that I signed." Who says being a lizard king in 2023 doesn't have its perks?

With each record since their 2017 EP, *Chosen,* Måneskin have amped up the volume and swagger. Their first album largely sung in English, *Rush!* is their broadest stroke yet, starting with its 17-song length. (*Esilio su Main St.,* anyone?) Like most modern rock bands, their version of punk is an aural food processor of stadium chants, programmed-sounding beats, and wind-tunnel blare. Sometimes an undeniable earworm emerges, like "Baby Said," or "Gossip," complete with a turntable-attack guitar cameo by Tom Morello. Even better, Måneskin revive the long-gone art of the deadpan, half-spoken New Wave novelty, making for kicky-fun moments like the mocking "Kool Kids" (who are such losers that they "do not like rock/They only listen to trap and pop") and "Bla Bla Bla," on which David boasts, "You said I'm ugly and my band sucks/But I just got a billion-streaming song/So kiss my *bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu*-butt."

Considering David's mocking, winking delivery, it's hard to tell how seriously Måneskin take any of this silliness. Certainly, being over the top suits them best. The LP's weakest moments are its most earnest: "If Not for You" is a generic power ballad, and "Il Dono Della Vita" is reheated grunge. But the ridiculousness of most of *Rush!* may be partly the point. In a landscape dominated by trap and pop, Måneskin know they have to push as many envelopes as they can (even if that includes an uncomfortable lyrical plug for OnlyFans). By doing so, they only manage to confirm how hard rock & roll has to work these days to be noticed.

SACHA LECCA

MARGO PRICE'S BIG COUNTRY

One of Nashville's most revered young artists keeps challenging herself By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

NASHVILLE singer-songwriter Margo Price has spent the past six years showing she's much more than a country artist. In 2016, she debuted with *Midwest Farmer's Daughter,* a critically hailed showcase of throwback honky-tonk and hard-edged drinking songs. She's broadened her scope on each successive record: See the R&B leanings of 2017's *All American Made,* or "I'd Die for You," the Bowie-meets-Ronstadt finale of 2020's record, *That's How Rumors Get Started*.

FROM TOP: ALYSSE GAFKJEN; GIOVANNIE BERDECÍA AND JANN FIGUEROA

Strays, Price's fourth album, continues in that same spirit of gentle redefinition. It's the most comprehensive iteration of her continually evolving palette. Despite being recorded in five studios across Nashville and California, it's her most cohesive LP – guided by light West Coast shadings courtesy of Jonathan Wilson (Father John Misty, Dawes).

Price finds ways to effectively and subtly tease out different shades from her longtime, versatile band, the Price Tags. "Time Machine," with its flash of Brill Building melodicism, is one thrilling new flavor that highlights Price's range as a vocalist. "Radio," featuring Sharon Van Etten, one of several decidedly non-country guests who appear, in addition to Mike Campbell and Lucius, finds Price and her drummer, Dillon Napier, experimenting with loops.

But the record's most exciting moments are when Price fully stretches out as a storyteller: Songs like "County Road" and "Lydia," third-person character sketches that unfold into six-minute-plus epics, serve as the album's anchor. Much as the first song on her debut album, "Hands of Time," told Price's own backstory with nuance and depth, these songs' narratives develop verse by verse, painting vivid, short-story-worthy portraits of Americans struggling in a world of endless prisons, opioids, and gentrification. (For more on American dystopia, listen to "Hell in the Heartland.")

As a songwriter, Price has never quite sounded more in command of detail and scene setting: "Remember when we got drunk that time in Ontario?" she asks on "County Road," over a foreboding piano melody. "Listening to Warren Zevon on the stereo?" Moments like these open up entire new worlds for an artist who is often at her best when she is staying happily unsettled. ®

Margo Price
Strays
LOMA VISTA

BREAKING

Puerto Rican Rap's Radical New Star

VILLANO ANTILLANO is just getting her career started, and she's already sharing the stage with Bad Bunny — thanks largely to a freestyle she released in June that garnered 155 million YouTube views. As a trans artist in a heterosexist scene, she's wrecking cultural boundaries, too. Her debut, *La Sustancia X,* completes the victory lap. She's a self-possessed whirlwind on the single "Cáscara de Coco," while "Yo Tengo un Novio" is a pop-rap track about being deservedly worshipped by your partner. It's the work of a star who won't let anything hold her back. **JUAN J. ARROYO**

WHAT TO WATCH IN 2023

We live in an age of nonstop content. Who's to say what's worth your time? We are! Here's a preview of shows and movies we've got our eyes on

BY DAVID FEAR AND ALAN SEPINWALL

Robbie

TOY STORIES

Why make movies about flesh-and-blood humans when you can make them about plastic people?

Barbie
July 21

It was perhaps inevitable that Mattel's signature doll would get her own movie — what was surprising was that the person making it would be none other than Greta Gerwig. The *Lady Bird* and *Little Women* director, who also co-wrote the script with her partner (in life and in movies), Noah Baumbach, is said to have fashioned quite a campy romp centered around the always fashion-forward blonde. And if the leaked on-set photos — featuring Margot Robbie as Barbie and Ryan Gosling as Ken, roller-skating around in hot-pink outfits — are any indication, this should be a gas. (After the images sent the internet into a frenzy, Gerwig herself said she hadn't realized how "insane" the costuming was.) The cast also includes Will Ferrell as the CEO of Mattel (no, really), Simu Liu, Issa Rae, America Ferrera, Hari Nef, Kate McKinnon, and Michael Cera. It should be worth its weight in Malibu Dreamhouses.

Gosling

M3GAN
Jan. 6

If we've learned anything from horror movies, it's that you never trust creepy-as-hell-looking dolls. Never! (See Chucky, the Zuni fetish doll from *Trilogy of Terror,* every scary movie featuring a ventriloquist's dummy.) This Blumhouse frightfest introduces the newest addition to the genre's evil-toy collection. Technically, M3gan is not a doll but a Model 3 Generative Android, designed by an engineer (*Get Out*'s Allison Williams) as a companion for her orphaned niece (Violet McGraw). The girl and her new robot bestie (voiced by Jenna Davis) quickly bond, with the latter becoming very protective of her human. Extremely protective. Like, *homicidally* protective. And once her AI functions exponentially expand, M3gan downloads what appears to be some Navy SEAL-level combat skills, and she begins to view the girl's aunt herself as a threat…all bets are off on who makes it to the final credits.

If there's anything we've learned from horror movies, it's that you can never trust a creepy-as-hell-looking doll.

McGraw, Amie Donald, and Williams

JAAP BUITENDIJK/WARNER BROS. 2 (BARBIE); GEOFFREY SHORT/UNIVERSAL PICTURES (M3GAN); UNIVERSAL PICTURES (OPPENHEIMER); HEIDI GUTMAN/PEACOCK (BUPKIS)

Murphy

REAL TO REEL

Ripped from the headlines and history books, these projects mine true events and famous lives

Oppenheimer
July 21

J. Robert Oppenheimer was a physicist who had studied in Europe and was recruited by the American government to work on a top-secret scientific endeavor known only as "the Manhattan Project." You likely know him as the father of the atomic bomb, which helped the Allies win World War II…and eventually cost Oppenheimer his soul. Director Christopher Nolan heads up this biopic on one of the game changers of the 20th century. Cillian Murphy plays the conflicted scientist; Emily Blunt, Matt Damon, Robert Downey Jr., Florence Pugh, Rami Malek, Gary Oldman (as President Harry S. Truman!), and what appears to be half of modern-day Hollywood round out the all-star cast.

The Idol
HBO

Sure, the Weeknd has starred in many music videos, and got into a fight with Adam Sandler's character in *Uncut Gems*. But can he carry a weekly TV series? If it's set in the world of pop stardom, he sure can. In *The Idol,* which he co-created with *Euphoria* mastermind Sam Levinson, the artist born Abel Tesfaye stars as a nightclub impresario who gets involved in the life of a singer (Lily-Rose Depp) as she attempts to come back from a nervous breakdown. This isn't the first time Levinson's worked with a Canadian-born music star: Drake is a producer on *Euphoria*. Maybe if the Weeknd needs some acting tips, he can ping the guy who starred in *DeGrassi*.

Davidson and Pesci

Killers of the Flower Moon
Date TBD

National treasure and MVP Marvel skeptic Martin Scorsese goes for the big guns again with this period piece tackling David Grann's 2017 nonfiction book about a previously forgotten, particularly dark moment in our nation's history: an epidemic of murders among Oklahoma's Osage Nation in the 1920s, tied to the tribe's oil rights. Longtime Scorsese leading men Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro are both on board, paired for the first time in one of the director's movies (and for the first time onscreen since 1993's *This Boy's Life*). Lily Gladstone is Mollie Burkhart, whose sisters died under mysterious — and very suspicious — circumstances, prompting her to petition the U.S. government to look into these crimes. And *The Power of the Dog*'s Jesse Plemons, the unsung hero of nearly everything he appears in, is an agent in the newly formed Federal Bureau of Investigation, who comes out to investigate.

Bupkis
Peacock

Some *SNL* cast members become famous for their original characters or killer impressions; some become stars primarily by being themselves. Pete Davidson is firmly in the latter category, with a personality so distinct that his lack of mimicry skills on the sketch show didn't much matter. Davidson has already capitalized on his singular appeal with a film loosely inspired by his life, 2020's *The King of Staten Island*. Now, he's playing a fictionalized version of himself in a comedy series (with Lorne Michaels as one of the producers, of course) that co-stars Edie Falco as his mom and Joe Pesci (in his first ongoing TV role since 1985's short-lived *Half Nelson,* whose ridiculous opening-credit sequence seems to go viral every six months) as his grandfather. Announced guest stars so far include Charlie Day, *Everybody Loves Raymond* onscreen siblings Ray Romano and Brad Garrett, and Davidson's old *SNL* co-star Kenan Thompson. No word on who'll play the many singers, models, and reality stars who'll enter his character's dating life.

Danes and Beetz

THREE'S A CROWD, FOUR'S A CAST

The only thing Hollywood likes more than a star vehicle is a *many*-star vehicle

Full Circle
HBO Max

His movies get all the love, but Steven Soderbergh is an underappreciated TV auteur, most notably for his great Cinemax historical hospital drama *The Knick*. So when he puts together a killer cast — including Zazie Beetz, Claire Danes, Timothy Olyphant, Dennis Quaid, Jharrel Jerome, and…Jim Gaffigan? — for a sprawling New York-set crime miniseries (about all the secrets uncovered by an investigation into a botched kidnapping), written by *Men in Black* and *Now You See Me*'s Ed Solomon (a previous collaborator on Soderbergh's interactive TV show *Mosaic*) that sounds a bit like the approach he took with *Traffic*? We pay attention.

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3
May 5

Marvel's resident band of interstellar misfits returns for one final *Guardians* jaunt through the galaxy. (This is the MCU we're talking about, though, so take that "final" bit with a boulder-size grain of salt.) Director James Gunn locks and loads what promises to be an epic cosmos-hopping adventure, which gives us a surly teen Groot and an origin story for Rocket Raccoon; brings back Zoe Saldaña's Gamora from the dead (wait, what?); and promises to introduce Will Poulter (*Midsommar*) as Adam Warlock — a big deal if you grew up reading comic books in the 1970s. Expect the usual crossover cameos, a revelatory end-credits sequence or two, and a lot of cheesy classic-rock tunes dotting the soundtrack. Plus, this entry is a key part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's "Phase 5," so don't be surprised if someone yells "But what about the Quantum Realm?!" at least once.

Masters of the Air
Apple TV+

First, there was *Saving Private Ryan*. Then Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg took their World War II fascination to premium cable with the 2001 miniseries *Band of Brothers*, which has become perhaps the most beloved piece of dad programming ever made. In 2010, they followed it with the raw and visceral *The Pacific*. More than a decade later, and now away from HBO, the duo reteam (along with *Band* writers Graham Yost and John Orloff) for the latest chapter in this Greatest Generation collaboration, about bomber crews in the war's European theater. Where the previous projects had largely white ensembles, this one will feature Black characters. Ncuti Gatwa (soon to star in *Doctor Who*) joins Austin Butler (a.k.a. Elvis) and Barry Keoghan to head up a cast composed of mostly unknowns. But *Band* and *Pacific* had future stars like Damian Lewis and Rami Malek, so don't be surprised to see breakouts from this talented group.

Chris Pratt and the Guardians

Guardians is back? Expect crossover cameos, a revealing end-credits sequence, and a lot of cheesy classic-rock tunes.

SPINOFFS AND SEQUELS

Sometimes — just sometimes — fans dig a franchise so much, the creators decide to keep it going

Agatha Harkness: Coven of Chaos
Disney+

The star of the latest MCU series? It was Agatha all along! Kathryn Hahn reprises her scene-stealing *WandaVision* role as immortal witch Agatha Harkness, who was last seen trapped in the wacky-neighbor role she had used to mess with the Scarlet Witch. As usual, Marvel's keeping big details under wraps, but we know one of Hahn's co-stars will be Aubrey Plaza, who previously played a scene-stealing Marvel villain of her own in FX's trippy *Legion*. Will Agatha, like Loki before her, have to reform in order to front her own show, or will Marvel finally spend a whole season on a bad guy?

Justified: City Primeval
FX

For six seasons in the early-to-mid-2010s, Timothy Olyphant's Raylan Givens was the coolest, quippiest, most trigger-happy lawman on TV, and the story of *Justified* ended as well as any drama has in recent memory. Now he's back, but in a miniseries based on a different Elmore Leonard story, set in the great crime novelist's beloved Detroit. We imagine Raylan will have many opportunities to think on his best piece of shared wisdom: "If you run into an asshole in the morning, you ran into an asshole. If you run into assholes all day, *you're* the asshole."

Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse
June 2

Because why have one Spider-Man — or even three of them — when you can have dozens? The sequel to this standout animated Spidey movie once again throws our man Miles Morales (voiced by Shameik Moore) into the middle of a whole mess of other web slingers from alternate universes, all of whom are going up against a dimension-traveling Marvel supervillain known as the Spot. Jake Johnson and Hailee Steinfeld return as Peter Parker, a.k.a. the OG Spidey, and Gwen Stacy, a.k.a. Spider-Gwen; the voice talent this time around also includes Daniel Kaluuya (Spider-Punk), Oscar Isaac (Spider-Man 2099), and Issa Rae (Spider-Woman).

Dune: Part 2
Nov. 3

He who controls the sequel controls the universe! Denis Villeneuve is determined to finish what he started and bring the second half of his colossal take on Frank Herbert's sci-fi classic to the biggest screens possible. Timothée Chalamet and Zendaya reprise their roles — as Paul Atreides, future savior of the universe, and Chani, the Fremen warrior who will help him achieve his destiny — as do returning actors Josh Brolin, Rebecca Ferguson, Javier Bardem, and Stellan Skarsgård. Meanwhile, franchise newbies Florence Pugh, Léa Seydoux, Austin Butler, and Christopher Walken will be getting fitted for first-time stillsuits as well. If this is even half as epic as the Oscar-winning, world-building Part 1, we're in for a treat.

Spidey lives to sling another day.

FROM TOP: SARAH SHATZ/HBO MAX; MARVEL STUDIOS; COLUMBIA PICTURES/SONY ANIMATION

Reeves

REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED ONSCREEN

Nothing makes for better storytelling than a pissed-off hero — or heroine — out for blood

John Wick: Chapter 4
March 24

Mr. Wick, Gentleman Assassin, Still-Grieving Widower, and All-Around Murderous Badass, is back. When we last left Keanu Reeves' iconic action hero, he'd been banished by the secret organization known as the High Table, shot off the roof of a hotel by his dear friend Winston, and was being nursed back to health by associates on the Bowery. Now, he's looking to get back into the good graces of his old employers (or at least avoid getting killed by their endless supply of highly trained thugs) — a feat that will involve a lot of yakuza, a marriage, a duel to the death with a mysterious aristocrat (*It*'s killer clown Bill Skarsgård), and fighting a fixer in the form of martial-arts legend Donnie Yen.

FROM TOP: MURRAY CLOSE/LIONSGATE; NETFLIX; DISNEY

The Curse
Showtime

Individually, Nathan Fielder (*Nathan for You*, *The Rehearsal*) and Benny Safdie (*Good Time*, *Uncut Gems*) have made some of the most profoundly uncomfortable filmed entertainment of this century — we're talking the kind that can leave audiences burying their faces in their hands and questioning the life choices that led to watching this. The two of them teaming up as actors and co-creators of this comedy should create a vibe of awkwardness that'll be palpable from outer space. Thankfully the premise — "an alleged curse disturbs the relationship of a newly married couple as they try to conceive a child while co-starring on their problematic new HGTV show" — and the presence of Emma Stone as their co-star make *The Curse* sound more appealing than mortifying. Even if we plan to watch it while hiding behind our couches.

Beef
Netflix

No, it's not a spinoff of *The Bear* (the wonderful FX on Hulu show about a Chicago sandwich shop), because the beef in this dark dramedy is strictly the metaphorical kind. A down-on-his-luck contractor (Steven Yeun) and an overextended businesswoman (Ali Wong) get into a road-rage incident that soon spirals wildly out of control, leading to a series of major and minor attacks that threatens to destroy both of their lives in the process. Yeun is a budding superstar who can play almost any tone well, and Wong showed an impressively expanded dramatic range in last year's *Paper Girls*. This show is a stark change from the last time these two teamed up, to voice a pair of happy lovebirds on the animated comedy *Tuca & Bertie*. (Not coincidentally, *Beef* was created by former *Tuca* writer Lee Sung Jin.) Making them into mortal enemies is sure to be explosive.

Yeun and Wong

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

These shows and films feel awfully familiar, revisiting worlds we thought we'd left forever

True Detective: Night Country
HBO

Even after the Mahershala Ali-led third season washed away much of the bad taste of *True Detective*'s disastrous second installment, it was hard to muster much enthusiasm for the franchise to continue. But with the departure of original creator Nic Pizzolatto, replaced by writer-director Issa López, the title seems poised for a fresh restart. And the new Arctic-set mystery stars Jodie Foster in her first continuing TV role in nearly 50 years — giving *True Detective* its first primary female lead. (Rachel McAdams played second fiddle to Colin Farrell in Season Two.)

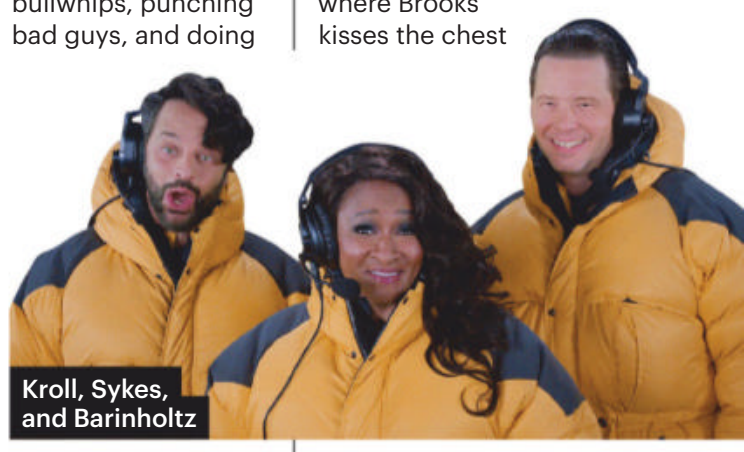
The Little Mermaid
May 26

Remember when racist right-winger shitheels lost their minds over the notion of a Black mermaid when Disney dropped the trailer for this live-action adaptation of its animated classic? There's something even more poignant now about seeing Halle Bailey singing "Part of Your World," and we couldn't think of a better casting coup than getting one half of Chloe x Halle to portray this generation's Ariel. Director Rob Marshall is no slouch when it comes to movie musicals (*Chicago*, *Into the Woods*) or Disney joints (*Mary Poppins Returns*), and the supporting cast is solid gold: Javier Bardem as Triton, Melissa McCarthy as Ursula, and Daveed Diggs and Awkwafina voicing Sebastian and Scuttle, respectively.

Bailey

Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny
June 30

You just can't keep a good intellectual-property hero down. Yes, Harrison Ford is still cracking bullwhips, punching bad guys, and doing his best to avoid snakes (why does it have to be snakes?) well into his eighties. He dons the dusty fedora one more time to go after what we assume is another ancient artifact (we'll give a year's salary to anyone who can tell us what a "dial of destiny" is). Though plot details are scarce, we know Phoebe Waller-Bridge is on hand as Indy's goddaughter; Mads Mikkelsen plays a no-goodnik Nazi; and Antonio Banderas and Boyd Holbrook are along for the ride as well. Also: Steven Spielberg is handing the directorial reins over to James Mangold, who knows a thing or two about aging heroes (see: *Logan*).


Kroll, Sykes, and Barinholtz

History of the World, Part II
Hulu

Mel Brooks' 1981 sketch-comedy film *History of the World, Part I* is perhaps best known for the French Revolution-era gag where Brooks kisses the chest of a beautiful young woman, turns to the camera, and smugly declares, "It's good to be the king." (Well, it's either that or the elaborate song-and-dance number about the Spanish Inquisition: "Confess! Don't be boring.") But the end of the movie left viewers dangling, with Brooks promising a sequel that would feature skits like "Hitler on Ice," "A Viking Funeral," and "Jews in Space" (the latter teasing a glimpse of Orthodox Jewish men roaming the galaxy in Star of David-shaped spaceships). Forty-two years later, Brooks — in collaboration with Nick Kroll, Wanda Sykes, Ike Barinholtz, and other comic minds of later generations who will also appear on camera — finally lives up to his word. L'chaim!

[*Cont. from 33*] Schmidt's office, the Cedar County Sheriff's Department employs at least three people who used to work at Agapé. One of them is Robert Graves, a student turned staffer who joined as a sheriff's deputy and married Kathy and Jim's daughter, and is listed as a member of the board of an Agapé-affiliated church. Sandoval, Agapé's dean of students, worked shifts at the county jail. He would later set up a transport business to collect teens, hiring off-duty deputies to help him.

Former students wonder if it's because of this that authorities failed to act sooner. Schrag says he tried to escape around 2007, when he was 15. "I got picked up by the Cedar County Sheriff's Department, and I tried to tell the guy, like, 'They're beating us, don't take me back there,'" he says. "And he said, 'No, they're not.' He cuffed me up and dropped me back off at Agapé. I tried to find a record of it, but there was none." (The Cedar County Sheriff's Department did not return calls seeking comment.)

Many Stockton residents consider Agapé a mark of honor. ("They do so much good for this town . . . and you cannot believe the difference they have made in these young men," says Jackie Cargell, who has lived in the town for 57 years.) Several former staffers opened up similar schools nearby: There was the Legacy Academy Adventures, on a property owned by David Smock, Agapé's longtime doctor who would later be accused of molesting students; there was the Master's Ranch Christian Academy, which later opened two more campuses. None of these raised eyebrows – until former Agapé staffers Boyd and Stephanie Householder opened Circle of Hope Girls' Ranch. That's where someone went too far.

LAST MARCH, Breshears says, he was on kitchen duty when a staffer said some chocolate milk was missing from the fridge, and accused Breshears and several other students of stealing it. They denied it. The argument grew heated, he says, and the staffer told the kids they were going to Brown Town. They were marched downstairs, where things escalated, until, Breshears alleges, he was lying facedown with a staffer sitting on his legs and two others digging their kneecaps into his pressure points.

The next morning, Breshears made a plan with the other students to start a "riot." That evening, as Agapé's 150 students and staffers were finishing up dinner, Breshears spotted a fellow conspirator flash a thumbs-up. On cue, at least two others started beating up an unsuspecting student to create a distraction. In the ensuing chaos, a third pulled the fire alarm. Breshears spotted a baseball bat poking out of an equipment bag. "I was just like, 'Screw it,'" he says. He grabbed the bat, charged toward the front of the cafeteria, and shattered a plate-glass window. "The glass flew everywhere," he says. Staffers grabbed Breshears and, he claims, threw him onto the glass. (Agapé denies this.) By the time he ended up in the Padded Palace, he recalls, "I was bleeding all over my head and hands." So he scrawled the words "Fuck Agapé" on the wall using his own blood.

He'd hoped to get kicked out, which didn't happen. But in July, his mother rewon custody and sprung him from Agapé. It was then he discovered an effort far more worthwhile than smashing windows: At least 18 other former students were filing lawsuits accusing the school and its staff of emotional, sexual, and physical abuse. The AG was on board.

It was a video secretly recorded at nearby Circle of Hope Ranch that finally moved state authorities to get involved. In March 2020, a former Agapé student named Joseph Askins stopped in to visit, and witnessed abuse that shocked him. Appalled, he used his phone to surreptitiously record Boyd Householder, who appeared to be ordering Circle of Hope students to physically assault one of their classmates. ("Knock her out!" he can be heard saying.) Askins reached out to Child Protective Services and then shared the video with the Householders' estranged daughter, Amanda.

Amanda, then 29, says her parents kicked her out when she was 17. By the time Askins contacted her, she had been in therapy for years, and was deeply enmeshed in an online community of former Agapé and Circle of Hope "survivors." She posted Askins' video to TikTok, followed by a second post alleging her parents regularly beat her and had forced a student to eat until they threw up, then eat their own vomit. The posts went viral – even receiving a thumbs-up from Paris Hilton. They led to a front-page story in the *Cedar County Republican*. Five months later, authorities raided Circle of Hope, seizing evidence and removing 25 girls from the ranch. *The Kansas City Star* ran a series of exposés detailing shocking allegations – first about Circle of Hope, then Agapé. The Missouri AG launched a joint investigation with Cedar County authorities. Lawmakers held hearings and introduced a bill that would give the state some oversight.

For the first time, religious schools would be required to register with the state and undergo inspections; the attorney general would now have authority to close down facilities that posed a threat to students. On March 9, 2021, AG Schmidt announced 102 charges against the Householders, including rape and physical abuse. Their lawyer denies the allegations and says that "their innocence will prevail" in court.

In May 2021, the law requiring religious schools to register with the state passed. By then, Circle of Hope had shut down after the state removed dozens of its students. Closing Agapé wouldn't be so easy, but throughout 2021 and 2022, the lawsuits began.

Recently, individuals associated with Agapé have been accused of a growing list of crimes. Earlier this year, Smock, the school's longtime physician, was charged with 12 felony sexual-molestation crimes against those in his care. In August, Sandoval was charged with arranging the kidnapping of an emancipated teen in Fresno, California, on behalf of the boy's estranged mother, and then having him driven, handcuffed, 27 hours to Agapé. (Both have pleaded not guilty.) In November, a man who is reportedly a former Agapé employee was charged with 215 counts of possession of child pornography.

After a months-long investigation, the AG's office recommended 65 charges against 22 staff members, accusing them of abusing 36 children. (The recommendations are not public, so the implicated staff members are unknown.) But under Missouri law, it was up to Cedar County prosecutor Ty Gaither to file charges. In September 2021, he charged five Agapé staff members with a total of 13 counts of third-degree assault, the lowest degree of felony. Bryan Clemensen was not among those charged. (As of publication, one defendant's case was dismissed, two pleaded guilty to misdemeanors, and two are awaiting hearings.) Gaither declined to comment, but told the *Cedar County Republican* that Agapé has the right to administer corporal punishment. "In Missouri, parents are allowed to discipline their children," he said. "People who have care, custody, and control of those children have that right, as well. In other words, Grandmother can spank the children . . . as can Agapé."

ON SEPT. 7, 2022, Attorney General Schmidt and the State Department of Social Services (DSS) filed to close Agapé. They noted that DSS had confirmed a case of child abuse and added the name of the Agapé staffer responsible to the Child Abuse and Neglect Central Registry, prohibiting him from working at a residential facility. A judge ordered the school closed – only to put the order on hold after Agapé fired the staffer in question.

The state has been fighting to close Agapé ever since. In addition to the fired staffer, DSS has substantiated findings of child abuse or neglect against Bryan Clemensen and two other Agapé employees, according to *The Kansas City Star*. So far Clemensen has kept his name out of the registry; he lost an appeal on Nov. 17, but has since filed for a judicial review in circuit court, which granted him a temporary restraining order keeping him off the list.

Meanwhile, Agapé has phased out the boarding school, instead running multiple group homes on its property, which detractors fear is a "shell game" aimed at shielding it from the new laws. Clemensen has said the move was necessary because negative publicity has caused enrollment to plummet, and it was not financially feasible to stay open.

Yet the delays have frustrated state lawmakers. "We are faced with the horrifying truth that a network of immoral individuals have engaged in what amounts to organized crime against children," Rob Vescovo, the Republican speaker of the Missouri House, wrote in a letter to U.S. Attorney Teresa Moore, urging her to employ the FBI to investigate.

Federal lawmakers say they plan to introduce legislation to curtail abuses in the industry. Advocates are watching the Agapé case, and suggest it illustrates why federal legislation is needed. But a Senate staffer helping to write the legislation cautions that in order to get a bill passed, they will likely have to tie compliance to funding, and are unlikely to mandate it.

Which means that even if Missouri does end up shutting down Agapé, the school could open in another state – just as the Clemensens did when they were driven out of Washington. South Carolina is a possibility; it still does not require religious schools to register with the state.

For many survivors of Agapé, that would be tough to accept. They say they're still haunted by nightmares, hypervigilance, and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. One former student reportedly mentioned Agapé in a suicide note. Bindley, who Clemensen calls "one of Agapé's top success stories," says the experience left him with lasting trauma, and "left a stain on my childhood growing up."

Colton Schrag says he decided to speak after PTSD drove him into counseling. "I realized I can't be the only former student to have these problems," he says. "I can at least try to show others that you don't have to keep it inside. You can start to heal."

For his part, Breshears is grateful to be free. He is living in California with his mother, Jennifer, and attending a public high school. Jennifer says she knows it will take a while to reconnect, and she worries about the psychic scars left by the school – she's already noticed that her son hates horses now. Though he is 16, he is a freshman; Agapé's curriculum is often not compatible with local requirements. But he's not complaining. "It's good to be back with family," he says. "I'm trying to aim for a decent life, you know what I'm saying? A decent life."

[*Cont. from 40*] finding new maturity and boldness in her relationships and artistic resolve. "I think before in my other projects, especially [my first album] *Los Ángeles*, I didn't really allow spirituality or eroticism to be a part of the project because it didn't really make sense in my life at the time," she says. "I just try to be open with whatever's really happening – I think it's the most honest way to make a record."

Motomami is the closest anyone has gotten to the exhaustive Rolodex of sounds living in her brain. After hearing a church choir as a child, Rosalía persuaded her parents to let her pursue music. At 13, she started training in flamenco, eventually studying under the revered professor José Miguel Vizcaya. When he began teaching at a selective college program, known for accepting one flamenco student a year, she followed him and absorbed everything the school offered, from classical compositions to jazz standards. In her free time, she'd blast reggaeton with her friends, but she often holed up alone in practice rooms, poring over textbooks. At night, she'd perform at tiny bars across Barcelona and go home, where her mom would blast David Bowie.

Rosalía remembers an artist in Barcelona once told her that more studying, more knowledge, more influences would stifle your creativity. "That's bullshit," she says, still in disbelief at the thought. "I heard that when I was 19, and I knew it was bullshit. If you're going to paint, you need colors, you need brushes, you need a canvas. The more colors you have, the more accurately you can express exactly what you want to. Knowledge never threatens creativity – it's exactly the opposite."

But that boundless thinking comes with difficult questions, ones that feel weightier when we're sitting in Puerto Rico, the cradle of reggaeton and salsa, genres rooted in Afro-Caribbean communities. *Motomami* debuted to massive praise, yes, but her forays into cultures that aren't her own also elicited anger. One article about the bachata song "La Fama" noted that bachata is a Black, Dominican-made genre that hasn't gotten the recognition it deserves on its own, and Rosalía's take "highlighted the white-washing issue overwhelming Black Latinx music."

What she does on *Motomami* is to pack in references like a thesis' bibliography, singing names out loud on the album. She says she's eager to draw the influences in her music back to the people who created them. "I hope that with my music, other people can find the amazing artists I'm really excited about," she says. "[Manolo] Caracol is an amazing flamenco singer, [so is] Camarón [de la Isla], but the same way I'll name [salsa artist] Willie Colón, or Omega. I find inspiration in so many different places and styles. It's beautiful, because I feel happy to be able to name where my references come from."

But while Rosalía is eager to cite her sources, what does it mean that a European woman had some of the biggest bachata and merengue hits of the year? Is the industry lifting up the originators of her sounds with equal reverence? The whole debate is complicated by the fact that Rosalía works with relentless precision and rigor, but once she finishes her songs, she leaves the final interpretation to her audience.

This way of thinking has let her keep industry demands and chart pressures at bay. In July, when she released "Despechá," it marked the biggest streaming debut of a Spanish-language song by a female artist on Spotify. But that was never the goal. "I can't control the charts, so I don't focus on that," she says. "I see many people that put the focus on that, and I don't know. I enjoy listening to music [where] I can tell the artists don't give a fuck."

SIX WEEKS AFTER we hang out in Puerto Rico, I meet up with Rosalía again before she performs at a small, private show at the Palladium theater in Times Square. Before I can confirm the address, I know I've arrived: A long line of Motomamis and Motopapis wearing mesh, leather, and harnesses coil around the entrance, a sign of how strong the *Motomami* cult has become.

Inside, Rosalía is standing on the stage in a plain white button-up and black pants, her face pulled into a look of intensity. While sound and lighting techs buzz around her making final adjustments, she's all focus, tweaking the mix in her in-ear monitors until it's just right. This is without a doubt the smallest venue she's performed at all year; it's probably the smallest she's performed at since the label showcase where she was first signed. Taking a show as big as the *Motomami* World Tour and translating it to a room one-eighth of the size of an arena is a huge task, clearly something that's weighing on her.

After soundcheck, we meet up in the green room, and I expect her to be less on edge. She's not. "I put on these shows, and I give everything. But before that, I have to get ready, I have to make sure everything is going to run smoothly. I have to answer questions and do things like this," she says, referring to our interview. The implication is clear: She has a lot of other priorities right now. She doesn't resent this conversation, exactly – she's as warm and thoughtful as she's been in our past meetings – but I can tell her mind is elsewhere.

Rosalía throws everything into her work, and the truth is, she agonized over *Motomami*. It explains why the moment Argentine rock star Fito Páez named *Motomami* the Album of the Year at the Latin Grammys this November, she burst out crying – which she didn't do when *El Mal Querer* won in 2019. "When I heard Fito say '*Motomami,*' I felt the weight of how much it took to make this project," she says. "I felt it so fast, I felt it through my whole body, like if the summation of the last three years had hit me and made me get up and made the tears fall."

Immediately, she embraced Rauw, who was standing to her right, and Pili, to her left. "I hugged the two people I love the most in this life, because they also know how much I had to fight to finish this album. Starting an album isn't a big challenge if you have dreams about it, but finishing it . . . that's another thing." The fact that her peers voted for the album meant even more. "I don't make music thinking about money, I don't make music thinking about awards, though I appreciate if I get any of those things," she says. "[I do it] because I know this is the reason I'm here."

And the album, in the end, was what she needed it to be. "I feel like on *Motomami*, I did and said exactly what I wanted to say and do, on my own terms," she says. "After this, there's no turning back."

At the Palladium, she figures out how to shrink *Motomami* down without sacrificing the show's energy. The entire crowd follows her as she dances on the venue's hardwood floor; a handful of fans join her onstage while the audience cheers them on. It's another wild party she's started, and once the show is over, it moves outside into the pouring rain. People dance late into the night – but by then, Rosalía is somewhere else, already living in the future. ®

KANYE'S DARK, TWISTED REALITY

[*Cont. from 45*] IN 2018, WEST TOOK A MEETING IN Chicago with a young creative who considered it a job interview. The potential staffer described feeling on edge when, upon entering the room, he found West dancing around to his own music on full blast. The creative remembers West finally turning his attention to the interview – and nonchalantly pulling out his phone.

"My wife just sent me this," West said, according to the creative. On West's phone, the creative claims, was an intimate photo of Kardashian. A source close to the creative recalls being told about the photo of Kardashian hours after the meeting. At least one other time in 2018, West showed an explicit video of Kardashian to members of the Yeezy creative team, according to a person who says they saw the video. (A spokesperson for Kardashian did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

West didn't show a Yeezy collection at New York Fashion Week that September. But he did travel to Las Vegas to work as creative director of the Pornhub Awards. For the occasion, he debuted new Yeezy apparel, designed a "bespoke erotica-inspired award statue," and publicly debuted the song "I Love It." A female staffer remembers West first playing the track for his Yeezy team at the office – with the chorus line "You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it" – and looking around for a reaction. "I grew up around this kind of music and this culture, and it's not as shocking to me because of that," the staffer says of West's workplace provocations. "But I can see why and how some people were super affected and super uncomfortable. And he's definitely said stuff to me, around me, in front of VPs, that *was* uncomfortable."

According to two former senior employees, West barred some Adidas executives from meetings; in turn, the employees say, managers at Yeezy felt expected to share meticulous notes from their West interactions with Adidas management. One former member of the Yeezy team says they found the culture "was so cult-like working for him – that conversation sort of turned around into, like, 'Well, they're still trying to control what we're doing here.' "

In 2019, a former staffer tells ROLLING STONE, the footwear design team had all but forgotten about one new model of Yeezys when she remembers being shown a text from West: "He said, 'We really need this shoe to be done because all I think about is Kim's ass and this shoe.' "

The alleged sexualized remark led to a prioritization of the product "from no work to the number-one most important model," according to the staffer. (Two former senior employees, who were not on the design team at the time, recalled hearing about the alleged remark and a product's priority shift.) "We ruffled a lot of feathers at Adidas to make and engineer it," the staffer remembers, although she viewed West's alleged directive with a silver lining of sorts.

"This is gonna sound so bad, but my first thought wasn't like, 'That's fucking weird,' because we're in it, we're in this cult," the staffer says. "Maybe this is me being a female in a men-dominated industry: If I'm comparing that text message to being in a room where he's playing porn, I would much rather have the text message – you're kind of like, 'Oh, that's flattering that he thinks of it this way.' And that's why, as an employee, you let all these things slide. Because you're looking for his approval, and that's why we would work so much. That's why we would put up with all this shit."

The staffer says she has tried cult deprogramming with her therapist since leaving Yeezy. The fast-tracked sneaker model never made it to market.

Multiple former Yeezy team members maintain that what they viewed as West's domineering tactics did not appear to be gender-based. "But I know that a lot of women who were in that room felt intimidated and felt bullied," says one former female employee. "It does feel reminiscent of an emotional abuser."

A senior employee recalls sitting with a female Adidas talent recruiter who was holding back tears; West was yelling so loudly on the other end of the line that the employee could hear him. The recruiter hung up, according to the senior employee, only for West to call back and yell at her again – apparently about the creatives West wanted by his side, not whomever Adidas was actually hiring. "She was basically moved out of the team" after complaining to her manager in human resources, the senior employee says. Two other former senior staffers described being told by Adidas leaders in Portland that a "soft landing" spot was available at the mothership for colleagues who feared West. "The way that they protect them is they move them out of the team and push them out the back door," says the senior employee who counseled the HR staffer. "Some people appreciate that, while some people think that it's just a cop-out."

According to three former senior employees, some general managers at Yeezy had repeatedly made clear to staffers that if they felt uncomfortable in a room, "You do not have to stay." Multiple staffers viewed the occasional interjection from both West Brands and Adidas corporate as lip service. "Imagine if Kanye's talking and you get up and leave," a former staffer says. "It's not like he's a professional – he would probably call you out right there."

One of the former senior employees says that some management figures "were absent when they should have been present" and that West's provocative behavior "was allowed to fester" because Yeezy was on its way to generating an estimated $1 billion to $2 billion in annual revenue. The employee claims to have been familiar with a draft proposal of mitigation options presented to the Adidas board in 2018, including cutting ties with West immediately. "There were for sure people who were on the let's-just-get-out train," the former senior employee says. "But the brand was very much driven by sales."

THEN, JUST LIKE THAT, it seemed as if West was ready to be saved from himself. In October 2019, West told Apple Music's Zane Lowe he'd been infatuated with porn since childhood: "Some people drown themselves in drugs, and I drown myself in my addiction – sex." But he described himself in the Apple interview as "having to kick the habit, and it just presents itself in the open, like it's OK. And I stand up and say, 'You know, it's *not* OK.' "

Gone, apparently, were the sex tapes and the "I fell in love with a porn star" flow; in came West's invite-only Sunday Service choir and "I repent for everything I'm-a do again." An organizational chart of Yeezy's creative hierarchy reviewed by ROLLING STONE, which a staffer said was provided by human resources, included a power ranking at the top: *God Kanye Artist Architect Doers*. West would often show up at rehearsals for Sunday Service, according to a former choir member, and launch into rants on subjects including race, politics, and, occasionally, how he'd been "saved" from his apparent former love of porn. "It was something he said he overcame," the choir member recalls.

West persuaded Adidas to transplant much of Yeezy's Calabasas showroom to his 3,888-acre ranch in Cody, Wyoming, and asked an estimated 90 employees to commute from L.A. or Portland – or else uproot their lives there. By day, West could cruise the streets in his Ford Raptor truck without Adidas looking over his shoulder. At the ranch, according to five former employees, he made unrelenting demands, sometimes to unqualified talent. "He might ask a chef to make a song and an architect to be his personal assistant," says one staffer in Cody. "He may ask a song producer to design a school, and the next day that becomes an orphanage, and the other days it becomes an airport." But musicians visiting the ranch to record the album that would become *Donda* weren't allowed to use curse words, and a former senior employee recalls West suggesting people who said "Hell, yeah!" repeat themselves with "Heaven, yeah!"

At times in 2020, things got "really uncomfortable," says a former staffer who worked for Yeezy in Cody. The staffer alleges West would do things like scream, jump on a table, and throw books across a room. "I feared for my well-being," the ex-staffer says. "Like, what if he throws something at you?"

According to a staffer with knowledge of the situation, West frequently scolded one female employee in Cody about her appearance. "He's just obsessed with power, and he has all the power and money to make somebody cut their hair, to make somebody lose their weight," the staffer says. "To the same person, he can go say things like, 'You fat slut,' and then this person will still have to be forced to stay because that's how they make money. They have a lease to pay." (Through an intermediary, the woman declined to comment.) "There's many forms of abuse," says the staffer, "and this is the kind of abuse that's so many kinds of abuse combined into one."

One former confidant who worked closely with West in Wyoming fondly recalled "his Jesus kick" and their time working on the Yeezy partnership. But after witnessing West's behavior in 2022 from afar – the all-caps Instagram posts lambasting Kardashian, the documentary in which he showed porn to Adidas executives, the hate-filled, antisemitic interviews – the confidant says, "Adidas enabled a lot of that kind of behavior." As sales exploded, Adidas' oversight seemed to devolve into a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. "It was probably better that they didn't know every single detail that was going on," says the former confidant.

The letter sent to the board in November laments "Adidas leadership's delayed action and sustained silence," calling upon the company's board to review contracts with the apparel giant's A-list partners – "with steadfast rules for termination of a partnership when problematic behavior arises" – and to issue a public apology to the Yeezy team for what the letter refers to as "Kanye's terrorizing behavior."

"As much as we all would love to solely blame Kanye," the letter states, "the undeniable truth is that the Adidas executive team and the board have been huge enablers."

A few weeks before West's career began to implode in earnest in October, he gathered the loyal misfits and art nerds who remained on Yeezy's skeleton staff, according to a staffer, for an impromptu meeting at one of his temporary L.A. office spaces. The staffer remembers the Yeezy team standing in a circle to listen to West discuss his struggles – pornography included.

"The oversexualized behavior has been consistent since the beginning," says a former senior employee. "I don't know that it ever went away."

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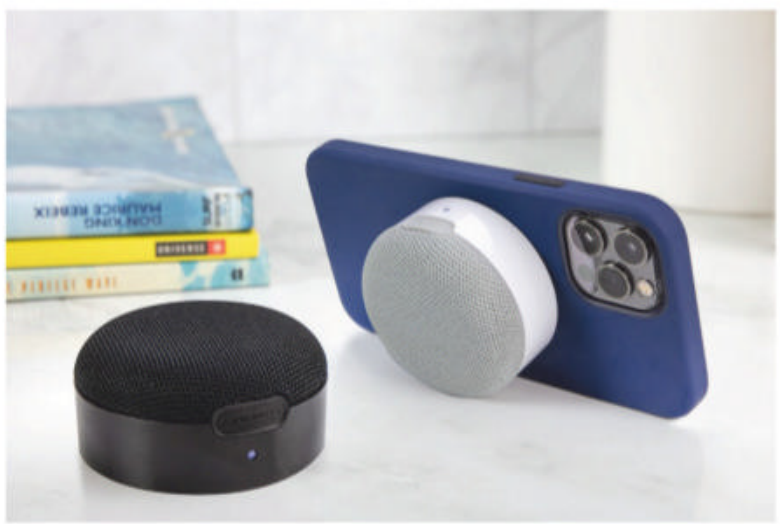

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[*Cont. from 59*] commence legal action, they'd seek $150,000 per leaked track – upward of $18 million. Under the threat of costly litigation, Dunsford filed for bankruptcy. To date, there's been no legal action against Dunsford by GN'R or UMG, but the concert ban is real.

In September 2021, Dunsford traveled to Chicago to see GN'R at Wrigley Field. He wore a hat, sunglasses, and a mask. (Many of the concertgoers were masked due to Covid.) Just before the show began, Dunsford noticed Lebeis onstage peering into the crowd. A moment later, GN'R's security chief, Gio Gasparetti, came striding through the crowd toward him. Dunsford immediately whipped out his phone and started streaming on Facebook Live.

"He comes and just swings at me, hits my arm, and is twisting my arm," says Dunsford. "Then he's swinging around to get my phone out of my hand. When he did that, he hit me, and I got a black eye from it. He didn't ask me once to leave."

In an email, Gasparetti says, "Nothing of the sort happened. Mr. Dunsford is out for attention." The video of the interaction is inconclusive beyond showing Dunsford being escorted from the stadium. He shared photos of his black eye, along with a report from an urgent-care facility in Mississippi where he was treated for a contusion and back pain he attributed to the altercation. He also filed a report with Chicago police, claiming simple battery. No arrest was made, but the incident shook Dunsford.

"Chicago did something different to me," he says. "They really are out for blood."

Fans have now been waiting nearly as long for a *Chinese Democracy* follow-up as they waited for *Chinese Democracy*. Whispers swirl about the imminent arrival of a new full-length culled from this batch of leaked material. But is this stuff any good?

Within the GN'R community, views diverge. "There's plenty of material that could really be a legendary album," says Dunsford. Kooluris is less sanguine: "These fans think Axl's got another 'Paradise City' or 'November Rain' in the vault, and he fucking doesn't." There's widespread enthusiasm for the raw, guitar-driven "Hard Skool," which was released as a single in 2021 and hearkens back to pre-*Chinese Democracy* GN'R. It's a particular curiosity because many fans interpret the lyrics ("You had to play it cool, had to do it your way/Had to be a fool, had to throw it all away") as a shot at Slash, who rejoined the band with Duff in 2016, and ultimately contributed guitar parts to the finished song.

Many of the leaked songs aren't hard to find online. Listening to them, it's easy to convince yourself that with a little polish, "Atlas Shrugged," the tense, dramatic "Perhaps," and "State of Grace," an industrial-tinged midtempo creeper, could've anchored another classic GN'R album. Other tracks feel half-baked. But judging these songs based on rough mixes feels unfair. Exploring ideas that never get fully fleshed out and trying things that don't succeed is how the creative process is supposed to work. This, of course, underscores the moral argument against leaking unreleased music. "Ultimately, there's only one truth," says Kooluris. "It's stolen music. These guys try to rationalize it, but it's not theirs."

THROUGH MONTHS of conversations and emails, Dunsford insisted he didn't leak the music. At the time the music began leaking, there were multiple others who had access to it including Lipton, Bird, MSL, and, possibly, Madeline. In his podcast, Bird admitted to selling the material. There's also speculation in the GN'R community as to whether Zutaut might somehow have benefited. Yet the only one who seems to have faced real consequences is Dunsford.

According to two copyright experts I spoke to, the legal landscape here is a bit opaque. By buying the storage unit, Bird owned its physical contents – the actual CD-Rs, tapes, and whatnot – but certainly not the underlying intellectual property they contained. So, while the purchase at auction was perfectly legal, once Bird started copying the music and selling those copies, he was in violation of the U.S. Copyright Act, according to these copyright experts. Anyone who makes further copies and/or distributes them is too.

Even assuming Zutaut did nothing other than fail to pay the bill for his storage units, Dina LaPolt, an entertainment and copyright attorney, believes he, and by extension, Interscope, may have some liability. "If he's an employee of that record company, was since fired, and was continuing to pay the storage fees himself, I'd claim the record company was grossly negligent by not checking if this A&R person was in possession of any unreleased intellectual property," says LaPolt. "If I was a lawyer for Guns N' Roses, I'd be like, 'If we want to go after the deep pockets, go after the record company where the guy was employed.' "

Kooluris told me that MSL tried to sell him the storage-locker music for $10,000. When I confronted MSL about that, he insisted he was just trying to throw Kooluris off the scent because Dunsford didn't want anyone to know he'd given MSL this music for free. "So I just led him on a wild goose hunt," MSL says.

Throughout the reporting of this story, I got a steady stream of messages from members of the GN'R community. Some wanted to share their part in this story, some wanted to share other, related stories, and some offered what seemed like disinformation. Oftentimes the email address or social media account wouldn't match with the name the person claimed to be. In the end, I discarded most of these messages.

But one caught my attention, from a guy named Kyle B, who posts on GN'R forums under the handle "Dadud" and asked to withhold his last name. In his email, he immediately confessed his role in the most consequential of the leaks: the Chairman leaks. He said he'd started a Discord server that was the hub of these leaks and received links to MP3s from Dunsford and another GN'R die-hard, "darknemus."

When I got on Zoom with Kyle B, I asked him why he was telling me this. His issue mostly seemed to be that Dunsford wasn't giving him any credit. "It's something I'm proud of a little bit," Kyle says.

Feeling a bit like a detective who'd spent months trying to solve a case only to have a random dude walk in the police station and confess, I was wary. I reached out to darknemus, who was responsible for helping spread some of the earliest *Chinese Democracy* leaks between 2003 and 2007. He agreed to talk on the condition that I only identify him by his first name, Craig. He emphasized that with any leaks he's been involved with, the tracks "had already been out there, they just hadn't been out there with a large group of people. It's not like I stole it from a studio."

He confirmed his role in the Chairman leaks. "Rick reached out to me going, 'I have all this. What do I do?' " Craig helped devise a method of distributing the music that would be difficult to trace. He also wrote the poems. "Yes, that was my atrocious poetry," he told me, laughing. "I was like, 'If you're going to do this, have fun with it.' "

One of his long-running motivations around leaking music has been to stick it to "the hoarding putzes," though he recognizes the biggest hoarder of all is Rose himself. "He doesn't owe anybody anything, but sometimes he teases like he's going to do something, then nothing happens, and people get frustrated," Craig says. "It's almost like drug addicts . . . . You're so desperate for a fix you'll do things not within the norm to get your fix. All these kids are acting like they're members of a spy ring . . . . You don't see that with Metallica or Faith No More."

When I finally confronted Dunsford about his role in the Chairman leaks, he dodged and weaved a bit before owning up. He maintains the early leaks up through the Numbers leaks weren't his doing. In fact, he says, at that point he was trying to help Lebeis and GN'R quash those leaks. "I felt like I did everything I could to help them and was stabbed in the back by Fernando. It was after that, when they took away the VIP tickets and decided to pursue me for the money, that's when I started getting with Craig about it."

Dunsford felt squeezed on multiple fronts. "Another thing was the constant attacks from the fan base," he says. "I had GN'R coming at me, then the fan base was so pissed at me because they wanted the music." Leaking would at least alleviate that pressure. He told me he hadn't initially been forthcoming because he didn't want to burn Craig, which may be true, but clearly he was covering his own ass, too.

Even though he's consistently played fast and loose with the truth, I find it hard to dislike Dunsford. He's a guy who has essentially been getting his ass kicked since he was a kid because of his inability to moderate his zeal. Of all the reasons Dunsford gave for leaking the music, it seemed like the one that animated him most was losing those VIP tickets to see GN'R. He mentioned it to me three separate times.

It's possible he's lying about how much he paid Bird for the thumb drive and that GN'R reimbursed him $3,000 more than he spent. But to put that in context, GN'R grossed more than $584 million from the reunion tour with Slash and Duff, which wrapped up the same year they wrote Dunsford a check for $15,000. He's not getting rich off GN'R. He's no master criminal. He's a fan desperate to hear new music from a band that often seems desperate not to release any. Something had to give. Even MSL, with whom Dunsford has frequently feuded, can't quite bring himself to hate him. "I think, deep down, he's a really nice guy who just gets too excited," he said.

Being a music fan has changed a lot in the past 20 years. Collecting an artist's every release was once the sign of a true die-hard. Now, we all have that for nearly every artist in existence for the price of a monthly subscription fee.

So, in this time of instant access and overwhelming abundance, what defines real fandom? How do you prove it? Well, if you're Rick Dunsford, you do whatever it takes to get your hands on the music nobody else has. When being a fan is easy, you do what's hard. These GN'R fans – not just Dunsford, but the whole collection of crazies – understand that.

Toward the end of the day I spent with Dunsford in Blue Mountain, I asked him whether he had any regrets about the way this all had played out. He said he's pretty much at peace with the whole thing.

"All I ever wanted was to hear this music," he says, then pauses before shaking his head. "I wouldn't change anything about this story for nothing."

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Jean Smart

The Emmy winner on politics, popularity, and sex with Brad Pitt

Your new movie *Babylon* is about the excesses of Hollywood's early days. I heard that in that first crazy party scene there were extras who were actually doing coke and molly.
[*Laughs*.] If I had seen anybody taking anything, I would've just assumed it was a prop. A few people were asked to leave, I guess. But I did think, "I'm not sure what my mother would think of this scene."

Jean Smart co-stars in the drama 'Babylon,' in theaters now.

What was she like?
My parents were both very bright and funny. My dad was a history teacher. My mother chose to stay home and raise four kids. They both grew up very, very poor in the Depression, so they knew how to do things for themselves.

What's something they taught you and your siblings that's really mattered?
A very clear message about being on the side of the underdog, which is why, I think, we were all staunch Democrats. I never could understand friends who wanted to do things deliberately to piss off their parents. I didn't have that rebellious streak.

So you weren't cutting class with the burnouts.
It's funny, because throughout high school, I used to think it was odd that I didn't have a clique. But maybe that's why I became an actor. I was a cheerleader, so I was friends with all the athletes and the cool people, but I was also in drama, so I was friends with all the theater nerds – I say that with the utmost affection and respect.

You've played some hard-edged women, but you've talked about how the character you're closest to is the innocent one from *Designing Women*.
I do still feel that way, though at this stage of my life, I've become more of a smartass. Being a smartass gets you out of a lot of situations.

Your comedy series *Hacks*, where you play a stand-up working with a much younger writing partner, features a lot of intergenerational humor about how the world is for women. How much progress do you think has really been made?
Every time I get into a dress that's too tight or undergarments that are too restricting or eyelashes that don't feel good for some event, I think, "I don't think we've progressed far. What man would do this to himself?" But I think we're chipping away at the inequities. There are more and more stories about women being told. That's not necessarily because we decided to be equitable; I think it's that, throughout history, with obvious exceptions, men were the ones who went out and did things in the world. Now, people are finally catching up with the fact that women are risking things and doing things in the same way.

In *Babylon*, you have a pivotal scene with Brad Pitt where you give a devastating monologue about the fleeting nature of fame.
Are you talking about our big sex scene?

[*Laughs*.] Yeah, that one. [Editor's note: There is no such sex scene.]
Yeah, get people titillated! No, the scene with Brad was why I had to do the movie. It's so beautifully written, and you see how my character is caught up in the mystical, magical part of Hollywood, this new industry that made people into practically gods and goddesses.

What's the last thing that made you cry?
I got to go to Elton John's last concert, and I thought back to how much déjà vu I had with so many different songs.

It's wild that Harry Styles uses Deborah Vance, your *Hacks* character, as his secret hotel name.
I know! I have actually never met the man. But he apparently is a fan. He sent me flowers and a gorgeous vintage pepper shaker, because my character collects them.

Before we sign off, just a quick mental picture: Where are you right now?
I'm not going to lie, I'm still in bed. I've always said I can't think of a reason to get out of a soft, warm, cushy bed except if I'm getting paid or have to take a child to school.

Do you have coffee?
I never got in a habit of drinking coffee, except when there's some Baileys Irish Cream in it.

So caffeine is not a vice. Do you have any?
Chardonnay and potato chips.

Together?
Sometimes, but then I really feel guilty.

ALEX MORRIS

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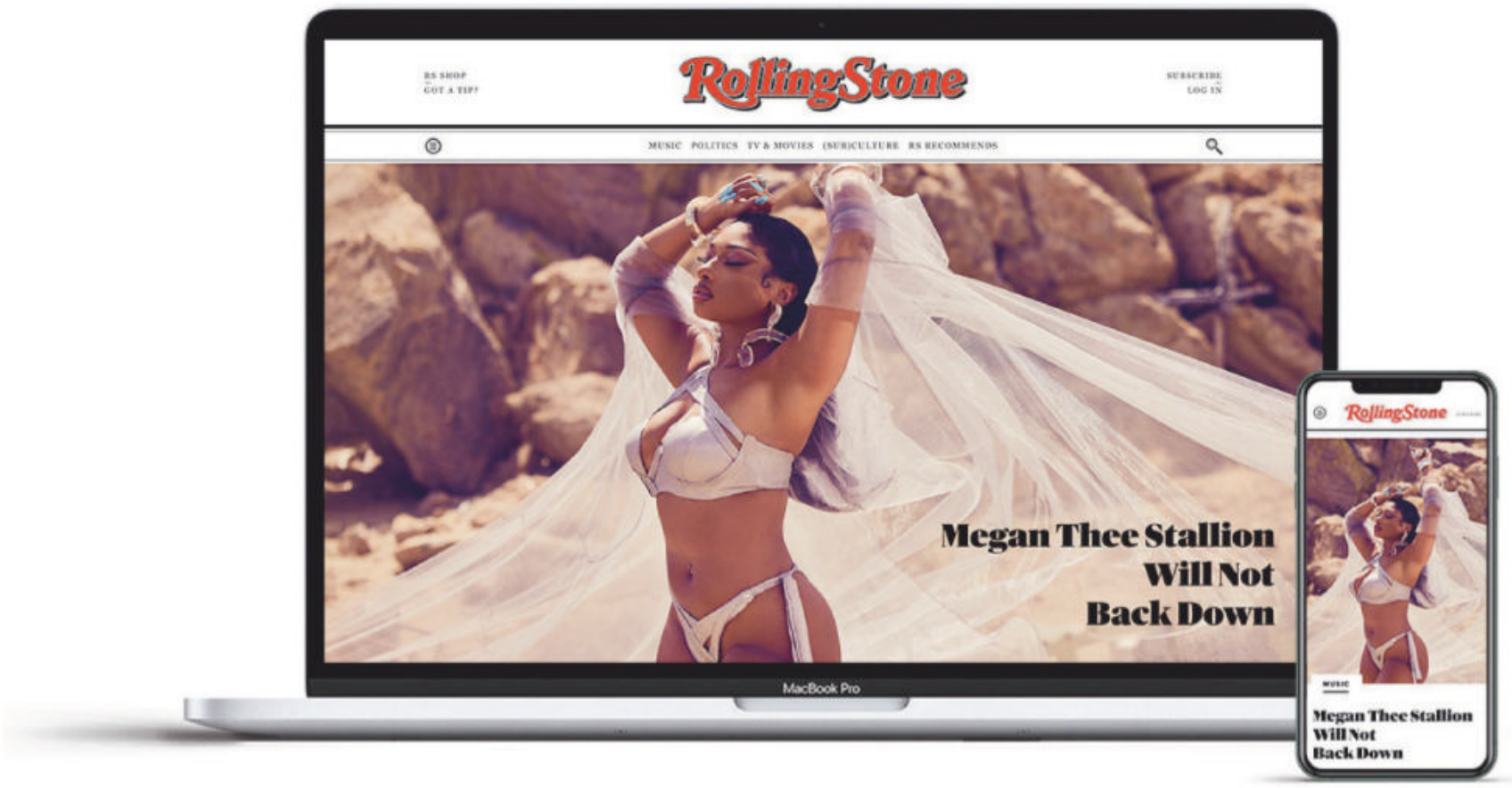

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